



# DARK SATANIC HILLS

Devil's dykes, dens, bridges and stones – **Martin Maudsley** is surprised that this malevolent entity has made such an impression on the British landscape...

**T**his land of ours wasn't always ours. Once upon a time, it belonged to the Devil. And a merry old time he had of things too, with the whole of the British Isles at his feet and fingertips...

Old Nick woke late in the morning, ravenous and ready for a full English breakfast served hot from the Devil's Frying Pan in Cornwall. After brunch he robed himself at the Devil's Dressing Room in Staffordshire and then, devilishly dapper, made his way down the Devil's Staircase in Wales and along the Devil's Causeway in Shropshire, all the way to Sussex where he excavated the Devil's Dyke. There he stumbled on a stubborn stone and angrily kicked the offending boulder out into the sea – which became the Isle of Wight. In Worcestershire, while fiendishly digging a dam, he inadvertently fashioned the Devil's Spadeful from a mound of spilled earth, and in Yorkshire, he gathered huge rocks to fill a ravine, but lost his footing and spilt them from his apron on the ground, as the Devil's Apronful. Then, for pure infernal fun, he made and played the Devil's Quoits in Oxfordshire, before slithering down the Devil's Slide on Lundy in the Bristol Channel.

After such thirsty exertions, Satan drank deep from the Devil's Punchbowl in Surrey – luckily it wasn't far to go to relieve himself at the Devil's Bog in Ashdown Forest. When hungry, there were meaty treats from the Devil's Beef Tub in Dumfries and Galloway, seasoned with the Devil's Mustard Mill in Cumbria; or a hot stew from the Devil's Cauldron on Dartmoor, mopped up with homemade bread from the Devil's Kneading Trough in Kent. Then, well fed, he rested in the Devil's Chair in Dorset before finally falling asleep in Somerset on the Devil's Bed and Bolster.

Eventually, perhaps through sheer exhaustion, Old Scratch died. But the Devil hasn't disappeared: for his scattered body parts are still visible and 'visitable' right across the British countryside today. The Devil's Head is in Angus; the Devil's Throat is in Norfolk; the Devil's Ring and Finger are in Staffordshire; the Devil's Elbow is in Aberdeenshire; while the Devil's Nostrils are in the Shetlands, happily far away from the Devil's Arse in the Peak District – a dark cave that still emits flatulent sounds to this day. So it must be all true!

*Turn over to find out why there are so many diabolical place names...*

Diabolical South Downs? As well as Devil's Dyke, a 100m-deep cleft in these chalk hills, the Downs are home to burial mounds called Devil's Humps and Devil's Jumps. Old Nick was certainly busy here...

### SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL?

The Devil, it seems, has made a lasting impression on our islands: there are more than 80 specific place names dedicated in his honour (some coexisting at several separate locations), plus many more vernacular geographical terms and a whole tapestry of myths and local legends linking the nefarious activities of Devil to the shape of the countryside.

As humans, our myth-making minds have a natural tendency to make sense of dramatic and awe-inspiring elements of the landscape by ascribing them to powerful personified forces. Who else as supernaturally strong or mischievously minded as the Devil could have created

## “The malevolence of the Devil was invoked in response to difficult and dangerous terrain”

such a huge cleft in the ground as the Devil’s Dyke on the South Downs? In this sense, the Devil is part of a pantheon of mythological characters, including gods, giants and dragons, which are all linked with place names and topography in Britain, and in some cases the Devil has superseded older associations.

In Surrey, there’s an intriguing example of the Devil appearing alongside a Norse god: according to local legend, the sprightly Devil used to leap between three peaks to taunt the ageing Thor, who responded by hurling a huge boulder that landed at the foot of the Devil’s Jumps. The Devil fled – but the

boulder and his name remain, while Thor is remembered in the nearby village of Thursley.

The malevolence of the Devil was also frequently invoked in response to particularly difficult and dangerous features within the landscape. Northern Scotland has more than its fair share of these, such as the treacherously winding Devil’s Staircase along the West Highland Way near Glen Coe, where many have lost their lives over the years (there’s a similarly steep, but less deadly, Devil’s Staircase in mid-Wales). Such ‘devilishly dangerous’ connotations can also be seen in the appellation of ‘Hell’, as in the precipitous Hell’s Glen in Argyll and Bute. In my own local area, in West Dorset, there is a deep and demanding holloway track that is officially designated Hell’s Lane.

As Christianity became the dominant religious belief system in Britain, undoubtedly there were also instances of ‘demonising’ pagan sites by ascribing them to the Devil; both to propagate negative associations with such places as well as to promote the growing role of the Devil in the church’s own mythology. In particular, many ancient monuments and prehistoric remains received such Christianised maligning, such as the Devil’s Den near Avebury.

### FROM FOLK TALE TO PLACE NAME

Finally, oral stories, embroidered over generations, tend to interweave into the physical fabric of the places where they were told. In medieval culture, the Devil was a common character in folktales, often as the foil for a pious saint or local hero, and through such stories was ‘blamed’ for a whole range of local landmarks – the Devil is, quite literally, in the detail.

For instance: the original Devil’s Bridge, near Aberystwyth in Ceredigion (right), was allegedly built by the Devil for an old woman who was stranded with her cattle on the wrong side of the deep gorge. In payment, he demanded the soul of the first living thing that crossed it – but Old Nick was cheated when she threw a piece of bread and her dog ran over the bridge ahead of her. Tellingly, almost exactly the same story is told of the Devil’s Bridge at Kirkby Lonsdale, far away in Cumbria.

There are also a few site-specific stories where the Devil comes out on top, such as at Stanton Drew in Somerset, where the fiddle-playing Devil turned revelling wedding guests into standing stones (left). ●

**Stanton Drew stone circle in North Somerset – the site of a rare victory for the Devil**



Photos: Alamy



**The Devil’s Bridge in Ceredigion leaps over a deep gorge with the River Mynach gurgling far below. Folklore has it that a wily old lady tricked the Devil here and saved her soul**

## Six of the best Devil's haunts

### ◀ THE DEVIL'S POINT CAIRNGORMS, SCOTLAND

More accurately translated from the Gaelic as 'devil's penis', this pert peak received its more euphemistic name from a discreet local guide during a visit by Queen Victoria. The same sovereign was also allegedly responsible for the renaming of the Devil's Arse in Derbyshire as Peak Cavern.

### THE DEVIL'S PULPIT ▶ TINTERN, WYE VALLEY

A limestone ledge perched high above, and affording great views of, Tintern Abbey. From here the Devil allegedly preached his profane sermons to the labouring monks below to turn them from their devout duties.

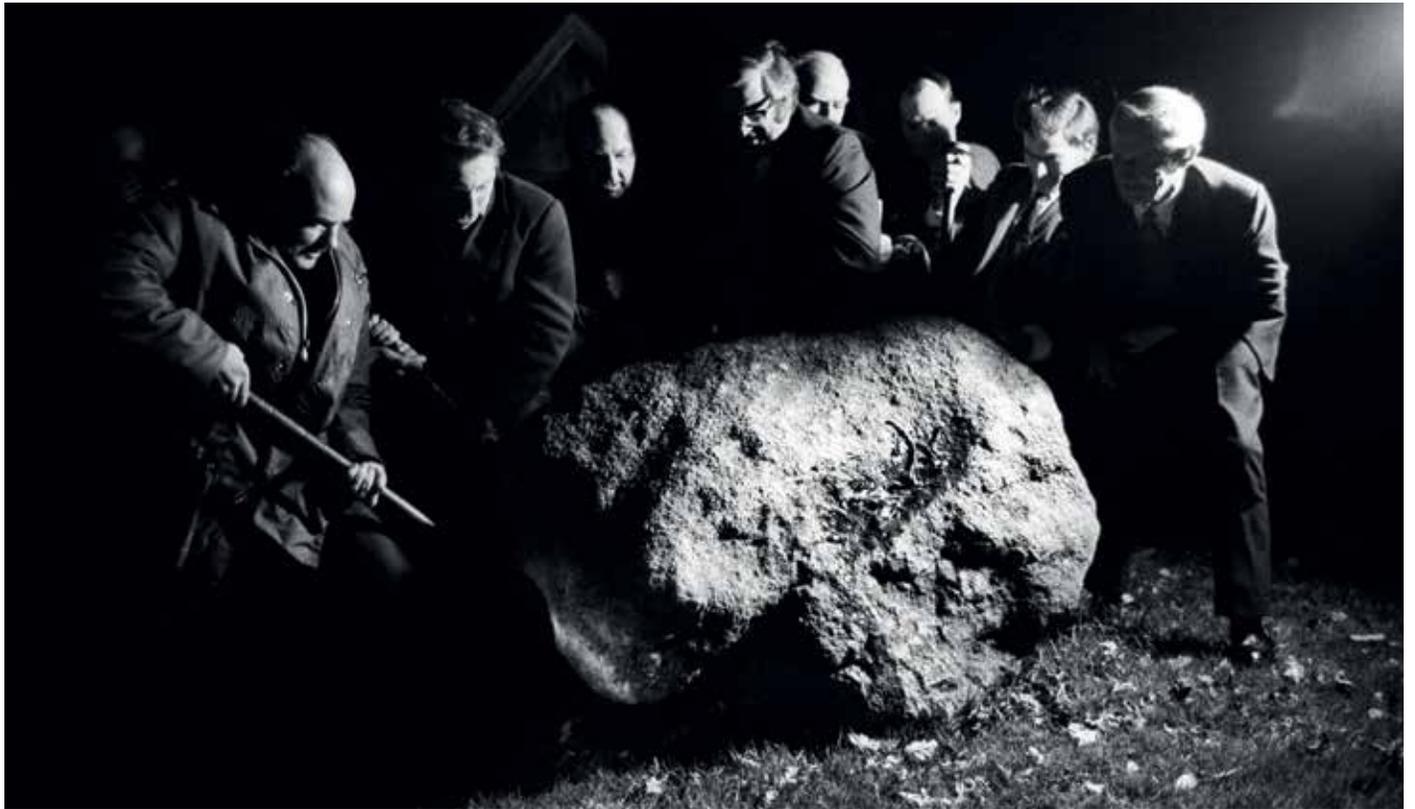
### ▼ THE DEVIL'S KITCHEN SNOWDONIA, WALES

A craggy cleft set amongst the forbidding peaks of the Glyders, complete with black, sooty sides and often surrounded by steaming clouds that have given rise to its devilish designation.



Photos: Alamy





^ **THE DEVIL'S STONE**  
SHEBBEAR, DEVON

Every year, on 5 November, the local church bell-ringers gather with crowbars to turn over a large boulder underneath which the Devil is said to be buried, before retiring to the nearby Devil's Stone Inn to toast the village's ensuing good fortune.

**THE DEVIL'S HOLE** >  
ST MARY, JERSEY

A spectacular 200-foot-deep blowhole through the rocky cliffs down to the sea, often producing eerie noises from below. Originally called 'spiral cave', it was renamed the Devil's Hole in the 19th century and now has an accompanying metal sculpture of the Devil.



**THE DEVIL'S DEN** >  
FYFIELD DOWN, WILTSHIRE.

Two megalithic stones and a balancing capstone are all that are left of this large Neolithic chambered tomb. Nevertheless, they still form a striking and evocative landscape feature that was ascribed to the Devil after the spread of Christianity.



**Martin Maudsley** is a professional storyteller, immersed in the folklore of Britain – especially that of Lancashire (where he was born) and his current homeland in Dorset.

Photos: Alamy, Homer Skyes