

## **The Myth of The Canal & Pocketts Orchard**

*Translated from the ancient texts by Jon Seagrave / Jonny Fluffypunk*

Perhaps you have wondered how all this came to be here?

This orchard, sloping gently down to the water? The water itself; this canal, silent and mysterious and half forgotten?

Look over yonder, to the West. There, the Forest of Dean, and beyond, faint in the distance, the hills of Wales. And between there and here, lying low and wide, the snaking River Severn, longest river of this land, home in legend of the Salmon of Llyn Lliw, said to be oldest and wisest of all the creatures- wise enough to have said of Gloucester, *'never before in my life have I found such wickedness as I found there'*. The Severn, whose swift and swirling, fast ferocious waters are named for the goddess Sabrina, spirit of that river, beautiful drowned princess turned water-nymph, in whose fertile floodlands-shaped, drowned and blessed through millennia- this orchard stands.

Now turn to face East. See the rise of the steep Cotswold scarp, the horizon guarded by the sleeping giants of Hetty Pegler and Nymphsfield and Selsey and Belas Knap. Beyond them, out of sight in the green folds of the gently-rolling hills, near Kemble Town, lies Thames Head, bubbling source of that other great river, which flows softly down through gentle middle England, lolling its way through the hallowed grounds of Oxford academe to reach that London, there to turn foul and brown past the stews and brothels of Southwark, the filthy docklands of Stepney and Bow, before finally vomiting itself, and a flotsam tide of container ships, into the grey and gloomy channel.

The Thames, home itself- like the Severn- to myth and deity, none more renowned than Old Father Thames, the naked and hairy river god, rich and spoilt and cocky in youth, then turned bluff and cockney with old age, whiffy in places, unstoppable as time, his big brown belly chocka with eels...

Two great rivers, one to each side of us, and between these two, a long, thin, silver thread of water. Water that defies gravity, tunnels through hills, clings to contours; that began its journey stained red with the spilled blood of navvies, then ran strong and clear enough to mould and nourish countless lives, only to end up slumbering for a century, still and thick and half-forgotten. This thread, of course, is our canal, the old Thames & Severn, the Stroudwater.

And the history books will tell you that the canal owes itself to industrial revolutions and commerce and burgeoning transport networks and in a sense there is truth in that, but it is far from the whole story. The true story is stranger, and as old as the hills themselves. And here it is.

So it was that many moons ago, Old Father Thames- that great, rumbling, ancient river-god, got wind on the tittle-tattling tongues of London's travelling traders and in the chirpy chatter of the coffee-houses, of the existence of a vast and mysterious river in the west, a river bigger even than his, the mighty Thames; a river home to a beautiful river-goddess, the wild, untameable, unknowable Sabrina. And all the talk was of how awe-inspiring this river was, how dangerous and breathtaking, how difficult to cross and how unpredictable, and the more Old Father Thames heard, the more intrigued he got, and the more intrigued he got the more agitated he became. *A river greater than the Thames? How could this be? A wild and untameable river-goddess?* Well, he would see about that.

*I'm Old Father Thames! I'm from London, and we're the biggest and best of EVERYTHING.*

And so Old Father Thames took it upon himself to go and find this other river, this *oh-so-much-better-than-the-Thames*, this mighty Severn, and this *oh-so-wild-and-untameable* Sabrina, and he would make Sabrina his wife, you see if he didn't, and he'd make the *mighty* Severn an outlying London borough, or something. W23.

And so it happened that one day, in late winter, Old Father Thames set off, winding his way back up his own waters until up near their source, where he left them and headed west. This huge, naked, lumbering river god, dripping with weed, wound his way across the land then slid beneath the rising hills, twisting and flowing his way in the inky blackness through cracked and porous limestone until he burst again in to the light at Sapperton. Ahead of him, far away and below, glittering in the weak January sunlight, Old Father Thames had his first glimpse of the glittering waters of our Severn.

And it really did look magnificent. A broad force of water holding back the faint and distant shoulders of the Welsh mountains.

And in that moment Old Father Thames realised that the goddess of such a river would be no pushover, and he also suddenly became aware that he had failed to bring with him any kind of gift. How could he come wooing without any kind of gift? He cursed himself. *You muppet.*

The dripping river god looked around him, but there were no shops to be seen. Nothing, This wasn't London, it seemed, or even Oxford.

Then suddenly, in the distance, Old Father Thames saw a figure; a strong young man was making his way downhill from the North, bent double under the weight of a heavy bag.

Now, unbeknownst to the weed-bedecked cockney water deity, this young man was Olludius, the Celtic fertility god, fondly revered across Europe and not least by the Dobunni tribe, the ancient Britons of what is now Gloucestershire, who had built him a shrine above Slad. It being late in winter, Olludius was off out, his pack crammed with the seed and the compost and the nutrients that he must spread and sow in time for the coming of Spring. That was the job of a fertility god.

Old Father Thames waved, and hailed him:

*Oi geezer! GEEZER! 'Ere, listen- I am Old Father Thames, chirpy cockney spirit of that river, and I've come over to make your Severn part of my glorious London empire, and make that Sabrina me wife, but I've forgotten a gift! I can't woo a lady without a gift now can I? Can you see your way to help me out, mate?*

And Olludius looked at Old Father Thames, all naked, moist and hairy, his bulging belly full of wriggling eels, and he knew this coarse, polluted old devil of a spirit didn't stand a chance with Sabrina, whose skin was as clear as a stream and whose eyes sparked with the ancient secrets of Cambrian mountainsides. Olludius was about to tell Old Father Thames to turn round and forget it, when a sharp twinge from his aching back, bent under the weight of his sack, gave him an idea.

Now Olludius was a noble and decent god, and so of course did not approve of Old Father Thames' casual determination to chase after Sabrina, for it seemed- and indeed was- the unwanted harassment of a river goddess minding her own business. However, Olludius knew Sabrina could easily hold her own against this dripping yobbo and what's more, he knew she liked to fight her own battles, and didn't take kindly to being 'protected' by well-meaning but condescending males such as himself.

And Olludius- who was clever and shrewd- had had a flash of inspiration; he suddenly knew how Old Father Thames' predatory ways could be used for the common good and turned to the benefit of all.

So, careful not to give Old Father Thames any encouragement, without saying a word, without so much as a nudge or a wink, Olludius drew from inside his heavy bag a basket of apples, beautiful and rosy. These were not just any apples; they were magic apples, for each contained within it the seed not of one tree, but ten, twenty, thirty trees, all different varieties. And as Olludius- who, as I say, was shrewd and clever- had the measure of Old Father Thames, he simply placed the basket of apples on the ground, turned his back for not five seconds, and when he turned round again the cheeky damp cockney had nicked them, as Olludius knew he would, and was

already legging it off into the distance. Olludius smiled to himself, and went about his day.

And Old Father Thames hurried on, feeling very clever with himself, winding down the Frome valley past the tiny villages, carrying his purloined gift of apples and whistling music-hall songs until, at last, he found himself stood on the banks of the Severn, facing the glittering water. The river was indeed so vast and swirling, so quietly and frighteningly powerful that Old Father Thames was taken aback for a moment. But he quickly pulled himself together, puffed up his chest, tossed back his long and straggly, weed-filled hair, and set about his wooing.

*Sabrina! Sab-reeeeena! Oi, Sabrina! Treacle! Sabrina! Show yer mush! I am Old Father Thames and I've come to ask fer yer hand in marriage, you lucky girl!*

And from the deep, Sabrina heard his foghorn calls and, curious to see what all the fuss was about, rose from the water, shining and golden, a raw and wild untamed beauty that Old Father Thames was utterly unprepared for. He was, to use his own language, *gobsmacked*, and all of his cynical schemes for conquest were suddenly forgotten as the bluff old river god fell instantly in love.

But as Olloudius foresaw, the beautiful Sabrina took one look at Old Father Thames, dripping and wet, loud, brash and naked and hairy- but not in a good way- and smelling faintly of sewage outlets and factory discharge, and she gave a single, derisive snort of laughter and turned to slide back into her fierce and mysterious waters..

And Old Father Thames ran down the river bank to the water's edge, begging he was, and wailing:

*Blimey you're a doll! Marry me Sabrina! Marry me and I'll sweep you off, take you up East to the smoke, treat you like a princess and no mistake. All the pies! All the mash! All the eels yer nawf and sarf can cope with! Please, oh please, Sabrina be mine!*

And reader, you ask yourself if he would be *your* choice. If he popped up on *your* Tinder page, what would *you* do?

But Sabrina did not need to mull it over, did not need to think twice.

Sabrina bowed to no gods, no masters.

Sabrina swiped *left*.

And then she disappeared back beneath the swirling water, and that was that.

On the muddy bank, Old Father Thames stood heartbroken. He had absolutely no idea what to do. This was something he had never felt before, but then never before had he seen such beauty as Sabrina. Never before had he been faced with a river even greater than he. He somehow knew at once that chasing after her, appealing to her, begging her, would all be useless. So he just stood there.

And then Old Father Thames did something he had never done before.

He wept.

The tears of Old Father Thames poured from him as if from a burst pipe. He wept and he wept, and as the sun began to set the tears were still coming out of him, and as the sky turned the colour of blood Old Father Thames turned at last to the East and began to make his way slowly homewards, though the cocky stride of before was gone. He plodded now, broken, and he did not stop weeping all the way; so many tears he wept that they flooded the ground in his wake. And in his hands he still carried his unwanted gift of apples. A fat lot of use *they* had been! In a sad rage he began to throw the apples left and right as he walked. And on he went, throwing away his apples, leaving behind him his flooded footsteps, a winding, shimmering ribbon of tears, and as he disappeared back again into the steep hillside at Sapperton, Olloudius- god of prosperity, fertility and plenty- watching from a hilltop, smiled to himself. That had saved him a hell of a lot of work.

And that ribbon of tears, it remains to this day, and there it is, at the end of this orchard, and today we call it the Thames and Severn canal.

And when spring came, those cast-away apples seeds burst forth: not one tree, but ten, twenty, thirty- whole orchards at a time, springing up by the canal, and this is one. Pockett's Orchard, the fruit of the first apple Old Father Thames cast aside. And when the appleseed sprang up, it sprang up a host of varieties! Ponsford, Bulmer's Norman, Malvern Hill and Fon's Spring. Moorcroft, Transparent De Croncels, Kingston Black and Laxton's Superb. Welsh Druid, Pope's Scarlet Costard, Backwell Red, Malus Cadbury and not forgetting Langworthy. And above the orchard came the circling buzzards and kites, and within its grasses and by the water's edge the water-voles, the demoiselles, the thick-thigh flower beetles and the setaceous hebrew characters, and all the other wonderful creatures.

And *that* is the true story of the canal and this orchard.

And in the old days, when the canal was still worked, the apples were taken away by boat, up through the tunnel to the Thames, and onward, to be pressed somewhere into cider, and then, who knows? Perhaps drunk up in London by those cockneys, their raucous songs dripping with the wild pomona spirit of the west, to cut like a knife to the heart of Old Father Thames.