



'A Wool Bogey', Ruby Tingle,
rubytingle.tumblr.com.

The Mysterious Rolling Wool Bogey

Simon Young

Introducing the Rolling Wool Bogey

At some point in the 18th century, the grandfather of William Barnes, the Dorset dialect poet, was out riding between Bagber and Sturminster, when he had what we would today call a paranormal experience. He was passing a haunted house on a 'dark and gloomy lane' when he 'saw the ghost in the form of a fleece of wool, which rolled along mysteriously by itself till it got under the legs of his horse; and the horse went lame from that hour and for ever after.'¹ Consider, instead, an experience that allegedly took place in the 1820s in nearby Oxfordshire.

[A] farmer, called George Andrews, was riding along the Clanfield Road past Cowleys Corner when he passed a sow with a litter of pigs. These made such a noise it frightened the horse, and in trying to stop him the farmer saw what appeared to him to be a wool-pack, which went rolling over and over along the fields from the Corner, till it at last vanished into the fish-pond near the Lady Well at Ham Court.²

In the late 18th or early 19th century an astrologer, a certain Mr Flight of Bristol, created a magic circle. After a great deal of noise, a downpour of buttons and just prior to a diabolical bull appearing: 'there came a figure apparently resembling a woolpack, which perambulated the circle, and as may be supposed, terrified the operators.'³ These three accounts are, or purport to be, experiences. But there is also a general West Country reference, this time from Devon (Okehampton Park): the ghost of Lady Howard 'is said to assume various forms. Some have seen her in the shape of a calf; others as a wool-sack full of eyes, rolling along from Fitz-ford. But most have seen her as a greyhound, and very often in the coach of bones.'⁴

A West of England supernatural motif then? Perhaps, but not solely as we have other examples from further afield. Lady Wilde, in 1890, described a spirit that appeared in the Irish Midlands:

The road to Navan has always had an unlucky reputation, and formerly it was considered very dangerous to persons travelling alone between dark and midnight; for it was haunted by a ghost, who appeared sometimes as a bag or a pack of wool rolling along, and no hands touching it, or as a shrouded woman with gleaming white teeth, or sometimes as a dog, the worst of all shapes for a ghost to appear in.⁵

Another example, from the same region, takes us instead towards fairies. Yeats knew of a Kilkenny pooka that 'takes the form of a fleece of wool, and at night rolls out into the surrounding fields, making a buzzing noise that so terrifies the cattle that unbroken colts will run to the nearest man and lay their heads upon his shoulder for protection.'⁶ Then, just in case we think that this is a freakish folklore motif from Ireland and the English West Country, consider now these lines from an obscure 19th-century Pennine poet, Thomas Shaw. He is describing Delph Will, a boggart that haunted Saddleworth: 'If you on errands went/ He'd catch you in the dark,/ And like a sheet of wool/ Come rolling close behind,/ And find you work/ To keep out of his lurch.'⁷ Near Leeds, fifty years later '[Sally Dranfield] declare[d] that she ha[d] often seen [the padfoot, a West Riding bogey, usually a dog] – sometimes rolling along the ground before her, like a woolpack – sometimes vanishing suddenly through a hedge.'⁸ Then finally and most bizarrely there was the ghost of a woman at Petty Lane near Chester Le Street in County Durham: 'When approached the figure would fall down and spread out like a sheet, or rather like a great pack of white wool. And when [witnesses] went forward to pick it up it would suddenly disappear. Both men and horses used to be startled by it.'⁹

We have given here nine examples of what I will call the Rolling Wool Bogey (RWB): three from southern England, four from northern England, and two from Ireland. These were gathered together through searches in archives, libraries and electronic databases by myself and, above all, by colleagues: if nine have been uncovered relatively easily in the last year then there will certainly be at least double that number in print. Four accounts were written up as experiences; five are what we might call here, instead, traditions. In six a supernatural entity rolls: 'rolling along' (x3), 'rolled along', 'rolling over and over', 'rolls out', 'rolling close behind'. The outliers are the magic circle woolpack that 'perambulated' (whether, given its shape and its circular route, this implies rolling is a nice question); and the Petty Lane ghost that collapsed. In all nine the RWB is described in terms of wool: 'a fleece of wool' (x2), 'a woolpack', 'a woolpack' (x2), 'a wool-sack full of eyes' (which begs a number of questions!), 'a pack of wool', 'a sheet of wool', 'a great pack of white wool'. We will look at some of the other common elements later in this essay. But first it is important to show that rolling textile bogies are not limited to wool.

Other Rolling Fabrics

I've limited myself above to rolling creatures specifically described with the word 'wool'. However, let's now go beyond wool to other words for describing fabrics, restricting ourselves again to Britain and Ireland.¹⁰ There is, first, a 19th-century witness account from Norton in Yorkshire where '[t]wo gentlemen (one, a very dear friend of mine..., now deceased) saw near a water [sic] an exquisitely beautiful white heifer turn into a roll of Irish linen, and then, when it vanished, one of them beheld a fair white damsel!'¹¹ I've not been able to establish what a 19th-century roll of Irish linen looked like: were the witnesses referring to the shape, size or possibly the consistency of the linen? There is, also, this suggestive story about the Welsh Pwca (a cousin of the Pooka and perhaps the boggart) that is different from the others because the Pwca enters rather than becomes a ball of yarn:

a servant let fall a ball of yarn, over the ledge of the hill whose base is washed by the two fishponds between Hafod-yr-Ynys and Pontypool, and the Pwca said, 'I am going in this ball, and I'll go to the Trwyn, and never come back,' – and directly the ball was seen to roll down the hill-side, and across the valley, ascending the hill on the other side, and trundling along briskly across the mountain top to its new abode.¹²

Then, there is too a late medieval reference from Byland (North Yorkshire) that also involves textiles and rolling. A spirit make a terrible racket, turns into a *pallidum equum*, 'a pale horse', which petrifies a traveller's dog, and is then challenged by the traveller with the name of God: 'quo audit recessit ad instar cuiusdam canuas reuoluentis quatuor angulis et uolutabat.'¹³ This last sentence has inspired translations that vary almost to the point of comedy. I would render it 'and that having been heard [the spirit] turned into the form of a four-cornered spinning sheet and rolled off'. Even if this is not satisfactory we certainly have a fabric that spins away.¹⁴

Why is there this interest in woolpacks, yarn and the like? Is it even possible that different witnesses and different tradition-bearers came up independently with the same or similar formulas? Today a woolpack, a wool fleece or a roll of wool are all rare objects: do you, reader, know what a wool pack looks like and if you do how many of your neighbours could say the same thing? But in a pre-industrial or industrialising society, bales or rolls of wool were common: particularly in northern and western England, where there were large sheep populations, and where, at times, woolpacks passed as currency. If William Barnes' grandfather saw a three-foot wide ball rolling across the countryside, how could he have described it to his grandson using objects that were familiar? A wheel is not quite right, as it is the wrong colour and the wrong shape: interestingly there are a handful of Scottish cases where a rolling bogey is described as

a wheel, a tradition that deserves a study in its own right.¹⁵ Nineteenth-century England had footballs and cricket balls, of course, but here the size and colour would have been wrong. Perhaps by saying a 'wool-pack' (or something similar) the witness came closer? Perhaps the witness also wanted to express an amorphous 'fuzzy' quality in what was seen? It is interesting that a 19th-century newspaper article describes flood waters as 'rolling packs of wool';¹⁶ cumulus clouds were, meanwhile, and in some cases still are, called 'woolpacks'.

Rollers and Witness Accounts

One of several interesting elements in this collection of RWBs is the number of witness accounts: there is William Barnes' grandfather telling his family about his encounter with the bogey; there is Sally watching the padfoot by her side; there is the deceased friend at Norton; there is Mr Flight in the magic circle; there is George Andrews trying to rein in his horse; there is the medieval traveller near Byland in the North Riding. Nor should this number surprise us. These memorates are second-, third- or fourth-hand, but raw first-hand witness accounts of anomalies have long included rolling, vaguely spherical forms.¹⁷ Take, for example, this early 19th-century account from Wales:

and presently [Henry Lewelin] could see a living thing round like a bowl, rolling from the right hand to the left, crossing the lane, moving sometimes slow, and sometimes very swift, swifter than a bird could fly, though it had neither wings nor feet; altering also its size: it appeared three times, lesser one time than another; it appeared least when near him, and seemed to roll towards the Mare's belly. The Mare then would go forward, but he stopped her to see more carefully what it was. He stayed, as he thought, about three minutes, to look at it; but fearing to see a worse sight, thought it time to speak to it, and said, 'What seekest thou, thou foul thing? In the Name of the Lord Jesus go away'; – and by speaking this it vanished, as if it sunk in the ground near the Mare's feet. It appeared to be of a redish colour with a mixture of an ash colour.¹⁸

Note how there is nothing in the description about light or gas. There is a sense, in fact, of solidity, whereas a modern witness would have probably assumed an electric or gaseous phenomenon of some sort. This might be simply because an early 19th-century observer was not familiar with floating gas: the closest would be a cloud or perhaps vapour.¹⁹ Our experience of the material world, naturally enough, restricts our descriptions.

No witness would assimilate a levitating and contracting red bowl (or ball?) to wool. But consider now, instead, two 20th-century fairy sightings with fabric-like characteristics. Here, first, is one of the John O'London fairy letters describing a pixie sighting on the



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Cornish-Devonian border. It was written by Joyce Chadwick in 1936 and seems to refer to a holiday 'a few years ago':

I was surprised to see on the cliff above me the figure of a tiny man, dressed in black, strutting round in a rather vain-looking way. So incredulous was I of the existence of the 'pisky' people that I said to myself, 'In a minute I shall see what he really is – a bird, or a shadow.' But no, he went on being a tiny man – until he changed into a quite indescribable thing (are not the piskies' Irish cousins known as the 'shape-changers'?); something with the appearance of a long, furry black roll, which gambolled about on the grass and then disappeared.²⁰

Here, also, is a description from 1955 recalling an experience of a Mrs Mayo and her friend in the last war.

They had not travelled far along the Darland Banks [Kent] when ... they sat down to rest ... As the two of them tarried there ... gazing across the intervening country towards the village of Luton, Mrs. Mayo noticed a little brown, fluffy ball, about the size of a tennis ball, speedily ascending the steep banks towards them. When it reached her left side (her friend, by the way, was seated to her right), it popped open, affording her a very brief glimpse of a gnome or pixie within.²¹

A 'furry black roll' 'gambolling' and an 'ascending' 'fluffy ball' ... We have here, I would suggest, two 20th-century RWBs; that is, the same thing being described with 20th-century vocabulary. It is also worth noting that while the existence and appearance of fairies are taught by tradition and popular culture, rolling fairies most certainly are not.²² It is interesting that Joyce Chadwick did not just edit the 'gambolling' part of her experience out in 'secondary elaboration'. The black roll is certainly 'off the script'.

The RWB in and out of Folklore

The examples collected above, however we choose to interpret them, offer a remarkable series and a remarkable bogey. Yet the RWB is not known to folklorists. It does not appear in fairy or ghost encyclopaedias and there is only one rather gauche discussion (by the present author when he knew of four of these nine cases).²³ That the RWB is not known to folklorists matters not a whit, of course. Far more confusing is the fact that *the RWB seems not to be known to folklore*. The sentence 'I saw a woolpack spirit' would have meant nothing in the 19th century: the category did not exist either

at the popular or the learned level.²⁴ It is enough to look at the variety within the 14 instances of a RWB (the initial nine plus the instances from Norton, Wales, Byland, Cornwall and the Darland Banks). In five accounts there is a ghost; in two accounts there is a fairy; in one account a pwca; in one a pooka; in one a boggart; in one a northern shuck (padfoot); in one a demon (the magical ritual); and in one case (Oxfordshire) the 'wool-pack' is not labelled in any way.²⁵ Can we draw any strands out of this tangle?

Katherine Briggs many years ago coined 'bogey beasts' as a folklore category, terminology that was picked up by other scholars including Jennifer Westwood and Jacqueline Simpson.²⁶ These 'bogey-beasts' (Briggs did not leave behind a simple definition) have five characteristics: they are country- (not house-) dwelling, often haunting one spot; they are mischievous or malignant; they are solitary; crucially, they are shapeshifters; and, interestingly thinking of RWBs, they appear in tradition with different labels (ghosts, fairies, hobs, boggarts ...). By this definition Shakespeare's Puck is a bogey-beast; so too are many north-western boggarts; so too is the Hedley Kow, and so too, I would argue, are the RWBs. We have already seen the confusion in classification. Consider now how many of the 14 RWBs shape-change. We have the ghost of Lady Howard (who doubled as a calf and a greyhound); we have the Navan ghost (who also appeared as a dog or a shrouded woman); we have the padfoot (which is normally a dog bogey); we have the collapsible ghost of Petty Lane; we have the Norton cow becoming a sheet and then a maiden; we have Pwca becoming a yarn ball; we have the Byland horse becoming a sheet; we have the Cornish pixy turning into a black roll; and we have the Darland Banks tennis ball (with a gnome appearing inside). Nine of the 14, then, could reasonably be called shape-changers and in other cases shape-changing may be implied: Pooka, for instance, 'takes the form' of a woollen fleece; William Barnes' ghost appeared 'in the form', again, of a fleece of wool.

But in other cases bogey-beasts tend to turn into women, horses or cows. Why is there this fascination with, of all things, rolling textiles? Two answers occur very tentatively to me. First, as we have seen, witnesses out in the British and Irish countryside claim to have seen spherical rolling objects, and sometimes these objects are judged to have had a fabric-like quality. It is happily not the task of this author to judge what these witnesses saw: non-supernatural phenomena jump to mind from tumble-weed to freak snow events, electrical phenomenon to earth gasses.²⁷ What matters for present purposes is that the tendency to see these things exists. Given this and particularly given the number of witness accounts quoted above, is it possible that wool bales emerged as an approximation to the experience of men and women on the ground? Woolpacks were simply the closest thing prior to the 20th century to what was perceived, and having perceived something so strange witnesses filtered it into the shape-changing tradition of the bogey-beasts. A second possibility is that the

idea of a globulous round mass was given by tradition-bearers as an intermediate stage when a given bogey-beast changed from one form into the other. As a car shifts from first to second gear it goes through neutral; and, in the same way, a boggart, say, shifted from cow to man by passing through the amorphous wool-pack stage.²⁸ These are again very tentative solutions. What is certain is that shape-changing British and Irish bogeys deserve extra research. They are, in academic terms, one of the most fascinating yet one of the most understudied forms of supernatural life in these islands.

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Notes

1. Lucy Baxter, *The Life of William Barnes: Poet and Philologist* (Macmillan: London, 1887), 305-6: what did Barnes think of this story? He concluded the tale, according to his son, 'with a humorous twinkle in his eyes'. Note that in many accounts it is understood that Barnes himself saw the ghost. This probably derives from Frederick Treves, in *Highways and Byways in Dorset* (Macmillan: London, 1906, pp.34-5), mistelling the story: Treves misses the word 'great-' from 'great-grandfather' and assumes that Barnes is talking to his grandchildren rather than to their father; his son.
2. Percy Manning, 'Stray Notes on Oxfordshire Folklore (Continued)', *Folklore* 14 (1903), 65-74 at 65. There are ghost traditions about this corner: J.A. Giles, *History of the parish and town of Bampton, with the district and hamlets belonging to it* (Bampton, Hollowate and Sons: Oxford, 1847), lxxiv-lxxviii. Compare lxxvii with the above: 'On reaching Cow-leas Corner he attempted to urge his horse to greater speed, when something passed like a flash of lightning rapidly before his eyes. He had no time to observe its form, in consequence of the rapidity of its motion. A loud noise followed, and the ghost, (for such no doubt it was,) glided backwards and forwards with the speed of light and the intangibility of a vapour; through the cart of the astonished higer, as if he would cut it in pieces. It is not surprising that the horse, frightened at these doings, took to his heels, and soon extricated his master from this fearful collision with the beings of another world.'
3. The Members of the Mercurii, *The Astrologer of the Nineteenth Century* (London 1825), 531: the ceremony took place 'a few years since'.
4. Elias Tozer, *Devonshire & other original poems: with some account of ancient customs, superstitions, and traditions* (Devon Weekly Times, Exeter 1873), 90.
5. Lady Wilde, *Ancient Cures, Charms, and Usages, Contributions to Irish Lore* (Ward & Downey: London, 1890), 164-5.
6. W.B. Yeats, *Irish Fairy Tales* (T. Fisher Unwin: London, 1892), 229.
7. *Recent Poems on Rural and Other Miscellaneous Subjects* (privately printed: Huddersfield, 1824), 130 (§39).
8. William Henderson, *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (London: W. Satchell, Peyton and Co., 1879), 237-8.
9. William Brockie, *Legends & Superstitions of the County Durham* (B. Williams, Sunderland, 1896), 74-5.
10. There are certainly parallels from continental Europe, e.g. Clara Stroebe, *Norwegian Fairy Book* (Frederick A. Stokes Co.: New York, 1922), 35: 'Curious, also, is the belief that trolls like to turn into skeins of yarn when disturbed, and then roll swiftly away.' The most important works on this subject of rolling yarn balls have been written by Alberto Borghini and include 'Il gomitollo nel folklore: linee per una tipologia. Una fiaba russa e l'antico racconto di Teseo nel laberinto cretese', *Studia Mythologica Slavica* 2 (1999), 233-43. But a wool pack is not really a yarn ball ... See the Welsh example below.

11. W. Longstaffe, *The history and antiquities of the parish of Darlington, in the bishoprick (Darlington Times: Darlington, 1854)*, 15.
12. I've also found a reference to the Pwca rolling as 'a handful of loose grass' ('Idiotic Superstitions', *Leeds Times*, 17 September 1859, 6). Note also from Dartmoor; Richard John King, 'The Folklore of Devonshire', *Fraser's Magazine* 8 (1873), 773-83 at 781: '[pixies] like balls of heather or fern, swept onward before the wind'.
13. M.R. James, 'Twelve Medieval Ghost Stories', *English Historical Review* 37 (1922), 413-22 at 419; the stories were written out c.1400, judging by palaeography and content.
14. For the translations see Jacqueline Simpson, 'Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse: Debatable Apparitions in Medieval England', *Folklore* 114 (2003), 389-402 at 398.
15. C.T.C.S., 'Popular Superstitions of Clydesdale', *The Edinburgh Magazine* 3 (1818), 153-8 at 156: a bogey in the shape 'of the ring of a cart-wheel'. John L. Campbell and Trevor H. Hall, *Strange Things* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1968), a bogey 'something like a mill-wheel', 254, and one 'something like the iron rim of a cart wheel', 263.
16. 'Sudden Discharge of Clouds, and Loss of Fourteen Lives', *Leeds Times* (22 Dec 1838), 6.
17. Bob Rickard, who contributed many interesting examples, came up, several years ago, with the winning phrase 'the unidentified rolling object' (URO).
18. Edmund Jones, *A Relation of Apparitions of Spirits in the County of Monmouth and the Principality of Wales* (E. Lewis Bookseller: Newport, 1813), 39-40.
19. E.g. Wirt Sikes, *British Goblins: Welsh Folklore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions* (Sampson Low: London 1880), 19.
20. Joyce Chadwick, 'Fairies Are not Dead!', *John O'London Weekly* (21 March 1936), 986.
21. Marjorie Johnson, *Seeing Fairies: From the Lost Archives of the Fairy Investigation Society, Authentic Reports of Fairies in Modern Times* (Anomalist Books: San Antonio, 2014), 28.
22. There are some very rare cases of fairies rolling, but they are so rare that they tend to confirm the rule: E. Ussher, 'Waterford Folk Tales', *Folklore* 25 (1914), 109-21 at 118. One interesting case that might suggest the possibility of a rolling boggart appears in Ammon Wrigley, *The Wind Among the Heather* (Huddersfield, Alfred Jubb & Son: 1916), 294-7. There Moll makes a pudding that rolls down a hill and that is mistaken for a boggart.
23. 'Shantooe Jest: A Forgotten Nineteenth-Century Fairy Saga' (forthcoming *Supernatural Studies*).
24. The only possible example of this I've found appears in John U. Powell, 'Folklore Notes from South-West Wilts', *Folklore* 12 (1901), 71-83 at 78 where at Longbridge Deverill the locals were frightened of woolpacks rolling down the hill on them; but they were also frightened of kegs of brandy being rolled down the hill so we are presumably dealing with *actual* woolpacks here.
25. The quotation in note 2 might suggest that it was seen as a ghost.
26. Katharine Briggs frustratingly never seems to have explained the term, though she employs it in contraposition to bogies, bogles, boggarts and, of course, boggle-boos: *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London: Routledge 2011), 34, 47, 70, 109. The term is adopted wholeheartedly by Jacqueline Simpson in 'Debatable Apparitions', *Folklore* 114, 399 and influentially by Jennifer Westwood and Jacqueline Simpson, *Lore of the Land* (Penguin: London: 2005), 560-1. I've used it here out of deference to Katharine Briggs, but I sometimes wondered whether 'Proteans' might not be a better term. This captures the physical changeability and perhaps to some extent the mischievousness of these beings; it does though sound rather too much like a term from science fiction.
27. For snow events: 'Rare self-rolling giant snow balls found in UK', *Daily Telegraph* (8 Jan 2010), online version: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/weather/6950788/Snow-stories-rare-self-rolling-snow-balls-found-in-UK.html> (accessed 15 July 2014).
28. I note that Stith Thompson includes 'D561.1. D561.1. Transformation by rolling.' in his *Motif Index of Folk Literature* http://www.academia.edu/11037037/Stith_Thompson_Motif_Index_Of_Folk_Literature_Revised_And_Enlarged_Version (accessed 30 July 2015).