

# The Myths and Legends of Oxford Printmakers' Cooperative

As the evenings draw in, and the wind whistles around the house of an evening, the telling of fairytales and folklore is a time-honoured way to entertain family and friends, whether beside a festive fire or with in a flamboyant panto. Creation Theatre Company, for example, are presenting a glorious retelling of A Christmas Carol at Oxford's The North Wall this month, where too, in the gallery space, you'll find the Oxford Printmakers' Midwinter exhibition, hot on the tails of a Myths and Legends project. Come, gather round to learn more of the mythical animals and characters they chose to showcase this autumn and hear their stories.



Claire Drinkwater 'Waylands' Smithy'

While evocative of the nativity story, *Outside the City Gate* by Gabriella Bailey is actually inspired by the story of Daphnis and Chloe; a Greek pastoral romance set on the island of Lesbos. "It tells of two children brought up by goatherds and shepherds in the lush and verdant meadows outside the city of Mitylene. Daphnis and Chloe live a rustic and bucolic life, tending to their flocks of goats and sheep, away from urban society. Throughout the story their incipient love grows but, since they do not understand how to express their desire, their fraught emotions are continually tested. Finally they marry and my drypoint recalls this nuptial scene: the marriage ▶







Lizzie Wheeler 'Wings of a Phoenix'





Above: Gabriella Bailey 'Outside the City Gates'



Ann Spencer 'Dragon Hill' closer in colour

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of Chloe, adorned in her wedding dress, to Daphnis, the goatherd. By now they have discovered that their respective birth parents are noble city-dwellers, yet having been reunited with them, the two lovers decide to return to the countryside for their pastoral wedding”, explains Gabriella. “I was attracted to this myth with its imagery of the pastoral life, an ancient precedent for the longings of many people today for a more bucolic way of life, and its tender love story.”

It's a different Greek love story that inspired Charlie Davies to create *Halcyon Days*. “The idea came to me whilst listening to Claudia Winkleman's radio show, where she was interviewing Susie Dent about her favourite words. Susie was explaining the meaning of *Halcyon Days* and how it is derived from the Greek Myth: Alcyone and Ceyx find themselves happily married. Buoyed by their love and good fortune, begin to call each other ‘Zeus’ and ‘Hera’, much to the anger of the Gods. When Ceyx is next at sea, Zeus throws a thunderbolt at his ship and drowns him. When Alcyone discovers her husband's fate she is overcome with grief and throws herself into the Aegean Sea intending to drown. The gods are touched by this tragic show of affection and, named after Alcyone, bring both characters back as ‘Halcyon’ birds — now known as kingfishers. Alcyone's father Aeolus, the god of the winds, soon decrees that the seven days either side of the winter solstice will be still and stormless. Alcyone can then enjoy a period of calm in which to lay her eggs. My love of the sea and kingfishers made me want to capture this story in an etching.”

Printmaker Lizzie Wheeler's protagonist in the linocut *Wings of a Phoenix* is equally luscious: “The idea of a bird of blazing feathers, rising up out of the ashes after being set of fire by the passing sun, is both visually strong and emotionally powerful,” says Lizzie. “It is a story of renewal and rejuvenation and has always been present throughout most of human history, across many cultures and religions. I like to think that for thousands of years humans have taken comfort and strength from the story; that maybe we too can rise up out of our metaphorical ashes into the sky on wings of fire. This is a two-layer lino-print. Both the pale yellow layer and the orange/red layer are printed using the same plate, but placed opposite ways up. The orange/red layer is inked with a gradient roll to create the fire-like colour effect.”

Also with wings and fire at its core, the mythology of Oxfordshire's Wayland Smithy has inspired printmakers Claire Drinkwater and Sally Levell. Claire's collograph and etching refers to both the legends and the physical landscape. “Wayland the Smith is a figure from ▶

Germanic folklore, a skilled maker of weapons and armour,” says Claire. “Like Daedalus in classical legend, he escaped from captivity by making himself wings from the feathers of birds. His smithy is an early Neolithic chambered long barrow, close to the Ridgeway, a short distance west of the Uffington White Horse. The massive stones of its entrance, and surrounding ring of trees make it an impressive and atmospheric site. Local legend says that if a horse that needs shoeing, or a tool in need of repair is left there overnight, with a small silver coin, a groat (fourpence) or a silver sixpence, in the morning the work will be done and the coin gone.’

Sally Levell’s collagraph and woodcut draws on her fascination for Anglo-Saxon mythology and the way in which it combines the religious and supernatural. “In the British Museum is Franks Casket which is a small, carved whalebone box and on one side is a depiction of the German/Norse God Wolund,” she explains. “Wolund was the God of Metal Working and on the casket are his tools of the trade which differ from later blacksmith’s tools. In the carving a robed figure is offering him something (coins?) - apparently in payment.”

And Ann Spencer’s screenprint of nearby Dragon Hill, created from a drawing of this unusual flat-topped hill that Ann made on site, has a real feeling of ancient feet having passed this way, the Ridgeway running nearby. Did George slay the Dragon here? Who knows, but there is certainly magic in this landscape.

These prints, others from the OPC Myths and Legends series, and a wide variety of seasonal art in many media can be seen as part of the Oxfordshire Artweeks on-line winter show: [artweeks.org/latestshow](http://artweeks.org/latestshow)

Many Artweeks artists also host or show their work at seasonal events during Advent. Visit [artweeks.org](http://artweeks.org) for further information.



Charlie Davies 'Halcyon Days'



Adam Jacot

## The Toponymist

Have you ever stopped to think why our towns and villages are so named? This fascination falls under the subject linguists call toponymy: 'the study of place names'

Each month I look at some of Oxfordshire’s villages and towns (and sometimes their streets, fields or local inns) to unearth the original reason behind our beloved county’s place names. Nettlebed, a village in the Chiltern Hills and northwest of Henley-on-Thames, has changed little as a name since being first recorded as Netele-bedd on a document of 1246, and meaning ‘a place in the valley where nettles grow’.

Crocker End Green Common, within Nettlebed’s parish, took its name from the Old English, which is the typical source of the name of many a town and village. ‘Crocca’ meant pot and ‘aern’ was a house, and so the spot was once ‘a building where pots were made’. Nettlebed’s Lords were mostly non-resident, but there is Manor Farm, which is thought to mark a medieval manorial site. Other landowners in time established mansion houses at Soundess, which derived from the sense of ‘sandy soil’.

Up the road is Nuffield, with its gorgeous Huntercombe Golf Club, referring to the ‘valley of the huntsmen’. The earliest known records that refer to Nuffield by name are from the early decades of the thirteenth century, with various versions including Togfelde, Toufeld or Tofelde, meaning ‘tough to work open land’. It changed in the following century to adopt the N in place of the T to become, in time, Nuffield.

The ancient Ridgeway path runs through this village and a section of the Ridgeway west of the village follows the ancient Grim’s Ditch (one of two in the county). In the village environs are names like Gangsdown Hill and Groveridge Wood and Hayden Hill (“where hay is gathered”). William Morris, was founder of Morris Motors Limited in Cowley, and later of the Nuffield Foundation, the Nuffield Trust and Nuffield College, Oxford. He took his name from the village to become the first Viscount Nuffield.