

# Eerie Eyrie

County folklore inspires tale of past returning to haunt the present

As the nights get colder and the dark draws in, it's a fitting time of year to curl up with an eerie tale - and what is fearsome than the spirits which might haunt your own doorstep?

Sussex's rich folklore provided the inspiration behind graphic novel *The Eyrie*, Thom Burgess's story of ghostly smugglers and haunted landscapes.

"Within *The Eyrie* itself there's quite a large part of the county's folklore", said Thom, as he reminisced about the influence that Sussex had on the creation of his book. "There's countless stories of phantom smugglers roaming the fields around Sussex or protecting their treasure and attacking would-be thieves - such as John Oliver's ghost at Highdown Hill, near Worthing - which resemble the motivation of *The Eyrie*'s Owlers. Also there's the spectral Hawkhurst Gang smugglers who are rumoured to haunt the Mermaid Inn in Rye. The Black Mantle smugglers in *The Eyrie* are loosely based on the Hawkhurst Gang who basically owned Rye in the 1700s, with the Mermaid Inn serving as their headquarters. There's also countless ghost stories at the Mermaid Inn, including a chambermaid killed by a smuggler who was concerned she'd reveal his secrets. To me it's always been the perfect archetype of the haunted British tavern!"

Inns with ghostly inhabitants are part of the folk horror backdrop of *The Eyrie*, along with sea-mist covered fields and hidden coastal vistas.

Following the story of Rebecca, a photojournalist who has taken on a job which involves a stay in an old remote cottage inn in East Sussex, Thom weaves an eerie tale in which Rye's past returns to haunt its present.

In *The Eyrie*, Rebecca begins to piece together the mysterious history of the The Black Mantles or 'Owlers', a much feared gang from the 1700s who met a gruesome end.

While writing his tale, Thom was heavily inspired by the landscape of Sussex. Intrigued by the mysterious tales of the county, Thom, who is from Canterbury, pays homage to



Sussex's coastal folklore in *The Eyrie*, which is his second book after horror graphic novel *Malevolents: Click Click*.

"Visiting Rye and Hastings from when I was quite young, I was always struck by the history of smuggling, which always seemed somehow wrapped in the folklore of the area," explained Thom. "For instance, the ghostly drummer boy of Herstmonceux, an area said to be used by smugglers, and the ghostly smugglers of Rye who supposedly haunt the old cobbled streets. Undoubtedly smugglers of the age also used ghost stories as a means to warn off people from the areas where they worked - if people didn't heed the warning they'd 'disappear'. It was very much a case of 'watch the wall my darling while the gentlemen go by'. Because of these Sussex tales, it's always been an area I've been intrigued in. A couple of years ago I was lucky enough to stay at the Mermaid Inn for a birthday trip during a very musty March and it ticked all the horror film tropes of misty cobbled streets, old creaky taverns and haunted inns. I think it was probably during

that trip when the beginnings of *The Eyrie* came about - toying with this idea of those ancient smugglers arisen from the grave in order to seek vengeance."

The Mermaid Inn makes an appearance in *The Eyrie*, as do some archaic Sussex terms.

"There's also a few old Sussex words within the story such as 'Aggy Jagger' (rolling sea mists), Bettermost (above the average) and Carfax (crossroads) which were great fun to use. The old Sussex dialect is fantastic," said Thom.

*The Eyrie* has been illustrated by artist Barney Bodoano, who has also created pictures for works by famous writer of horror stories, M.R. James. For Thom's graphic novel, Barney has used a palette of black, grey and white, reflecting the misty landscape and mysterious atmosphere of the tale.

"I think Barney did a great job of capturing the bleak tones of the landscapes surrounding the tavern," said Thom. "The Carfax Inn is supposedly set in Fairlight in Sussex which is both beautiful but can be quite a lonely spot too. Barney really helped set that tone and did a great job capturing that feeling of isolation within the panel work. You really do get that feeling of the shadows creeping out of the panels of the story."

And he's right - *The Eyrie* tells a very eerie tale, harking back to the format of classic ghost stories. From the very beginning of the graphic novel, the reader gets a real sense of anxiety and tension, which builds up as the tale develops.

"I've always been a huge fan of ghost stories as far back as I can remember," reflected Thom. "I was raised on a diet of M.R. James (including the fantastic TV adaptations), along with Charles Dickens and E.F. Benson in particular. I think it's fascinating analysing what chills someone in fiction - both on screen, stage and in literature. So much these days rely on jump scares for instant gratification."

What Thom instead creates with *The Eyrie* is a narrative which slowly unfolds, creating a compelling atmosphere of chill and claustrophobia: an uncanny reflection of the themes within Sussex's own folk stories.

