

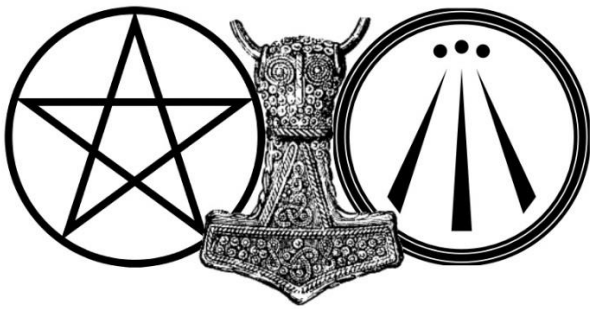
Oss Riders on the Heath



Image: Szara Crowe

The Ickeny and His Kin

With Chris Wood



Norwich Pagan Moot

Sunday 9th February 2025

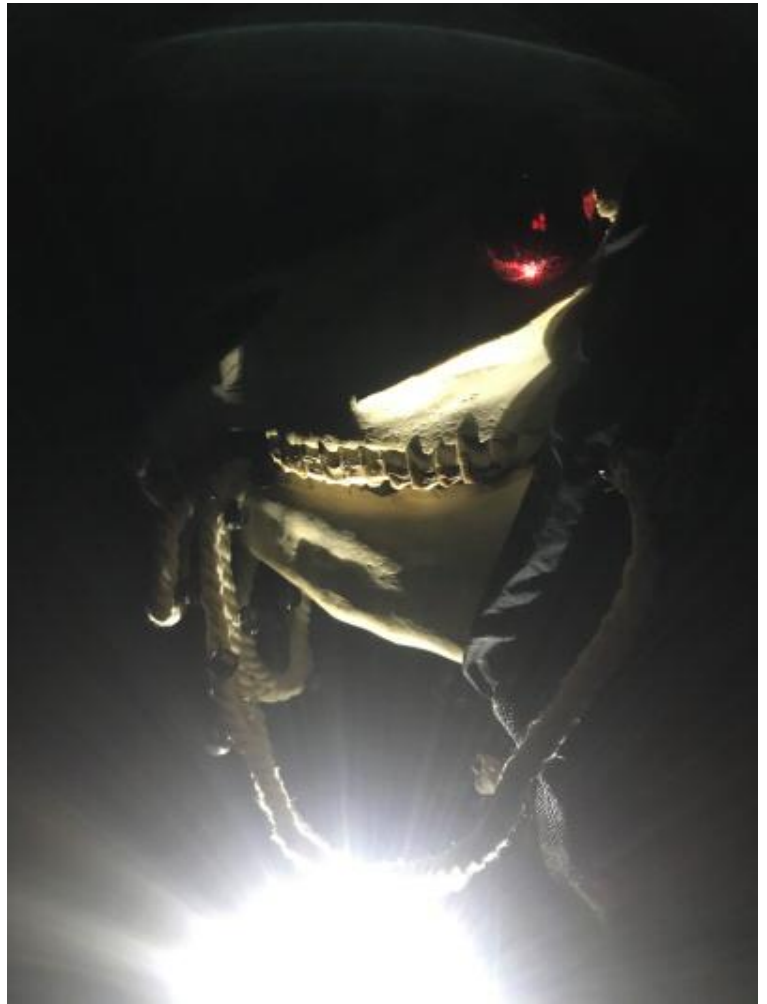
Silver Road Community Centre, Norwich

www.norwichmoot.co.uk

The Ickeny's Story

The Ickeny is Norwich Pagan Moot's 'oss. He comes out at our rituals, especially at Twelfth Night, when He appears in his dark winter garb, embodying the dangerous and chaotic forces of midwinter. Later in the year, He reappears in His summer garb, bringing the blessing of his dynamic energy to our endeavours.

He is a tall, mysterious figure with a horse's skull (carried on a pole or mast), a form most famous from the Welsh *Mari Lwyd* traditions and *Penglaz* (and friends) from the *Montol* and *Golowan* Festivals in Penzance.



The Ickeny prepares for Twelfth Night 2020 (picture by Szara Crowe).

In Norwich, we have borrowed the idea of the 'Oss from our friends in Cornwall. The Ickeny may look scary, but He is a focus for the image of those untamed forces of Nature that we need to keep at bay. So He enters the circle we form on Mousehold Heath at Twelfth Night and our Champion drives Him out to gallop across the heath safely, leaving just enough of His energy for us to set about our tasks for the year.

It was after the Harvest Moon 2015 conference that some of the speakers and organisers gathered at Matthew Fox's house and Gemma Gary from Cornwall talked to us about the *Montol* Festival and its 'oss. Inspired by this, Harvest Moon purchased a horse skull and various people contributed to the construction and dressing of an 'oss for Norwich and Norfolk, which was named 'The Ickeny', from the Norfolk dialect word for disobedient horses, which *may* in turn derive from the name, Icenii, of the people who lived here 2000 years ago.

Whilst the skull in life was probably a mare, the Ickeny has always felt like a he – perhaps having had so much masculine energy put into the conversion. But He is a Trickster and gender fluidity is part and parcel of guising.

The following winter saw the first public Twelfth Night Wild Hunt Ritual (January 2016) on Mousehold Heath, beginning with a procession from St James' Hill, led by the Ickeny and a Whiffler. Subsequently, the Ickeny passed into the care of the Moot and the Twelfth Night Ritual has taken place on the Heath on the closest Saturday to Twelfth Night every year since (except 2019, when all the key personnel were ill!). Even in Lockdown, the Ickeny ventured out for exercise with His support bubble.

He appears at Spring and Summer rituals, and at the annual Boudica's Brocante too. Occasionally, He can even be spotted at other people's events!



Left: The Ickeny at Norwich Moot's Beltane Ritual, 2017, on Mousehold Heath, with His 'prodders' (picture by Sadie Huxford). Right: The Ickeny put in an appearance at the Norfolk Goddess Temple's 2019 Enchanter's Ball at Jurnet's Bar (picture by Chris Stocking).

The Twelfth Night event has changed over the ten years it has been going. Beginning as a strict ritual, it has gradually become more open, more family friendly and even absorbed elements of pantomime. It has become a local folkloric event – indeed, the Norfolk Folklore Society promoted it in 2025 – but the serious ritual blessing and protection of the community remains core.



The Ickeny in his summer garb.

What is an 'Oss?

The horse has always been important in Britain and is celebrated on 'Celtic' coins and in the great Uffington White Horse. It appears in many folk customs and processions. The tourney-style hobby horse is perhaps most widespread, and seems to blur the boundaries between horse and dragon, so it is interesting that Norwich's Snap Dragon is of this kind, and is very similar to the processional horse, Hob-Nob, in Salisbury. Indeed, Norwich's Lord Mayor's Procession now has a tourney-style St George on horse-back to accompany the Snap Dragon. The Golden Star Morris side also has a hobby horse, named Champion.

Mast Horses (etc.)

1 Tall

- *Penglaz / Pen Hood / Kazek Nos*, etc. (Penzance).
- The Ickeny (Norwich).

2 Held at head height or stooped

- Hooden Horse (most commonly Kent).
- Cheshire Wild Horses.
- Old Tup / Derby Ram.

3 Variable height

- *Mari Lwyd* (Wales).



The author honoured to be able to try on the Snap costume at a Norfolk Folklore Society event, 20th November 2024 (picture by Val Thomas).



The Norwich Snap faces off against St George outside the Cathedral at the Civic Service, 11th June 2023.

Tourney-Style Hobby Horses (etc.)

1 Stylised horse body of basket-work, carried on the shoulders with the rider's head protruding (e.g. Salisbury's Hob Nob or Norwich's Snap Dragon).

2 Stylised horse worn around the waist (e.g. St George (Norwich) or Champion (Golden Star Morris, Norwich)). The structure may be very simple (e.g. the Hobby Horse of the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance).

3 Sieve horses, where a notional horse head and tail is attached to the front or back of a large sieve (minus the wire) worn around the waist (e.g. the White Horse of Burringham, Lincolnshire, which also features a horse costume over the person).

4 Discs with skirts and sometimes a small representation of a horse's head and tail (e.g. Padstow 'Obby 'Oss), sometimes with no resemblance to a horse (e.g. Kett's Horse, Norwich)!

Other guises... Abbots Bromley Horn Dancers, Salisbury Giant, Whittlesey Straw Bear, Dorset Ooser, cross-dressing, face masks, etc., etc.

Actual animal elements can include...

Horse skull (*Penglaz*, Ickeny, *Mari Lwyd*), ram's horns (Derby Ram), antlers (Abbots Bromley), animal skin covering, etc. Also, it is worth comparing circular frames with the use of skin belts in magical animal transformation rites...

One annual event in particular illustrates important aspects of this guising – the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance (Staffordshire)...

Abbots Bromley, 11th September 2017



'Oss Meanings



These are not necessarily *origins* – which could be debated until the ‘osses come home – and meanings change over time in living traditions!

Dragons?

Dragons are an embodiment of wild, powerful forces of nature – quite like the Ickeny! As with the Uffington White Horse, dragons and horses overlap. The hero tames that wild nature and controls it for the benefit of agriculture and civilization. It is interesting that George is not usually shown with a dead dragon, but in the act of pinning it. He can release it when more primal energy is needed. He is also usually seen on horseback. Perhaps the horse is the Dragon tamed? And the Dragon is strong in Norwich...

Further Reading

Violet Alford (ed. Margaret Dean-Smith) (1978) *The Hobby Horse and other Animal Masks*, Merlin.

Ben Edge (2024) *Folklore Rising: An Artist's Journey through the British Ritual Year*, Watkins.

Richard Lane (1976) *Snap: The Norwich Dragon*, Trend Litho.

Nigel Pennick (1998) *Crossings the Borderlines: Guising, Masking & Ritual Animal Disguises in the European Tradition*, Capall Bann.

Nigel Pennick (2022) *The Spiritual Power of Masks: Doorways to Realms Unseen*, Destiny.

Peter Salt (2010) *Snap: The Norwich Dragon*, Snap & Co.

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Val Thomas and Chris Wood will be at Hidden Charms 5, the magical protection conference, in Cardiff on 12th April. Their presentation, *The Multi-tasking 'Oss* considers the luck-bringing and protective aspects of 'osses across the UK, how they both terrify and protect their communities, their increasing popularity and the appearance of new 'osses.

A poster for the 'Hidden Charms 5' conference. The background is light blue with faint, overlapping circular patterns. The text is centered and uses a mix of bold and regular fonts. The title 'HIDDEN CHARMS 5' is at the top in a large, bold, serif font. Below it is a subtitle: 'A conference about objects and symbols used to protect people from supernatural harm'. The date 'Saturday 12th April 2025' is in a large, bold, serif font. The location 'St Fagan's National Museum of History, Cardiff' is in a bold, serif font. Below that, the text 'Nine Leading Experts Speaking' and 'Opportunity To Meet Like-Minded Folk' is in a smaller, regular, serif font. At the bottom, it says 'Tickets & Information:' followed by the website 'www.apotropaios.co.uk' in a bold, serif font.

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