

## The Legend of LANNOCK HILL

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The village of Weston, in the north-east of the county, is spread along a hill-top, from which several lanes descend sharply to the west. One of these is known as Lannock Hill, and about half-way down there is – or was – a small pit filled with scrubby bushes, close to the road.

Once a year, the wraith of a coach and horses is said to rush down the hill, plunge over the bank into the pit, and turn over. (Not that anyone claims to have seen or heard it, I may say). Ghosts usually haunt on winter's nights, with howling winds to add to the effect, but at Weston the happening is at midnight on 12th August, a date, unlike midsummer or hallowe'en, not usually connected with weird goings-on.

That invaluable book *The Golden Bough*, however, is helpful. Sir James Frazer in his opening chapter tells of the death of Hippolytus, favourite of the goddess Diana: when he was dragged to death by his horses as he rode in a chariot by the sea, she caught him up in a cloud and made him a god. The pair were worshipped in a sacred grove at Nemi, but Diana's own day was kept with fires and torches all over Italy, on the 13th August. The reputed coach accident, then, was on the eve of Diana.

Another Hippolytus, a medieval saint, was also said to have died in the same manner – and the date of his festival? August the thirteenth. This looks like a Christianising of the pagan legend, in the usual manner.

Now, can we make use of this type of folk memory to learn more about the real past? I am supposing that such a memory exists at Weston of a sacred

grove to Diana and Hippolytus, with the Greek chariot changed in the course of repetition to a ghostly coach of the 18th century.

Now, it is three miles or so across country to the village of St Ippolyts. Here, in the days of chivalry, knights took their horses into the church to be blessed.\* Again, Sir James Frazer steps in to enlighten us. He came to the conclusion that a legend where a certain animal kills a man is often transmuted over a long period of time to a state where the man is considered the special patron of the animal, or the animal

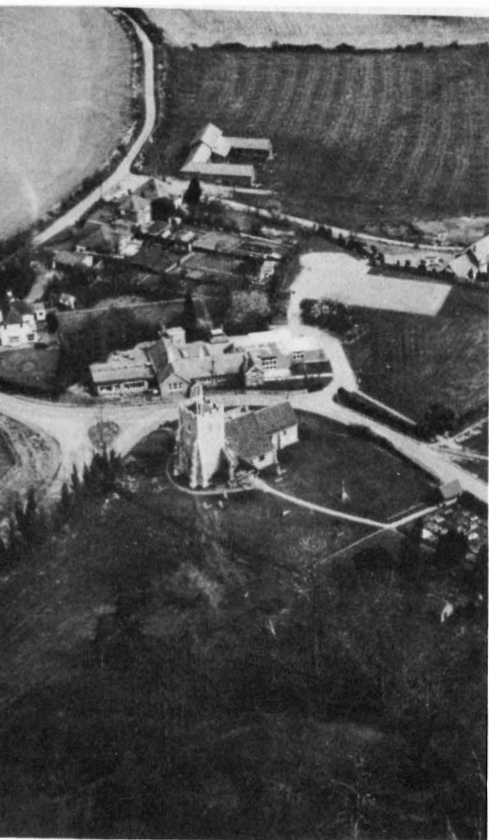


*St Ippolytus or Hippolytus, as portrayed on the church banner. (Photograph by J. Dettmar).*

becomes the emblem of the man.

Bearing all this in mind, it looks as though some cult took place at St Ippolyts in the remote past, but why does the coach run away down the hill at Weston, while the saint's name sticks three miles away – were there two sacred groves? A fire on top of either hill could have been visible at the other. Or for reasons of persecution – competition from a rival religion, or the new Christianity – was the temple

*St Ippolyts: the church on the summit of the hill. (Photograph by courtesy of the Rev. R.F. Law).*



moved by its adherents from one village to the other?

I am perhaps going too far, too fast, but it could be that men, or horses, were sacrificed on these hills, perhaps three thousand years ago. If this did happen, and went on for long, then there should be some sort of tangible remains, and this is where science must come to the help of surmise. If a dig should ever take place at either site, on the hill-top, the well-equipped archaeologists of today might be able to find some positive proof, aided perhaps by aerial photography.

\*Our earliest account of St Ippolyts – repeated verbatim by Chauncy – was written by John Norden in his *Description of Hertfordshire* (1598):

*"This place was dedicate to a supposed Saint of that name, that in his life time was a good tamer of colts, and as good a horse-leeche; and for these qualities so devoutly honored after his death, as all passengers by that way on horsebacke thought themselves bound to bring their steedes into the church, even up to the high alter, where this holy horseman was shryned, and where a priest continually attended, to bestowe such fragments of Eppolettes myracles upon their untamed coltes and olde wanton and forsworne jades as hee has in store, and did avails so much the more or lesse as the passengers were bountifull or hard-handed, but he that was coy of his coyne had but a colde and counterfeit cure".*