

OCTOBER 2024 MONTHLY BLOG/ 166

WHY DID THE MAN IN THE MOON - WHO CAME DOWN TOO SOON - ASK HIS WAY TO NORWICH?



Man in the Moon © istock/ Getty Images 2024

The man in the moon,
Came down too soon,
And asked his way to Norwich;
He went by the south,
And burned his mouth
By eating cold plum porridge.

It's a charming nursery rhyme, with many minor variants in the wording. This version is the one that I knew and loved as a child. Song historians like to point out hidden messages in such traditional verses, designed to amuse the adults who sang these songs to their unsuspecting offspring.

Yet, in this case, the experts conclude that the words of 'The Man in the Moon' probably do not convey any secret meaning. They are simply agreeable nonsense, in which the City of Norwich features primarily to rhyme with 'porridge'. Children would enjoy the thought of the Man in the Moon actually coming down to visit Planet Earth. And they would laugh at the upside-down

qualities of the lunar traveller whose mouth was burned by cold food. Suitably weird!

Only much later did I think more specifically about the role of Norwich, when I began my doctoral research on that city's fascinating history.¹ I quickly realised that, throughout many earlier eras in British history, it would not have seemed at all surprising that the Moon Man should want to visit the East Anglian capital.

For many centuries, after all, Norwich was one of England's leading provincial capitals.² It had famously lively inhabitants, who were known for their readiness to express radical views - whether by popular riots or by voting for radical candidates in eighteenth-century parliamentary elections. And the city lay at the heart of a major textile-producing area, making the famous 'Norwich stuffs' [light worsted cloths]. In other words, Norwich was an urban Manchester-equivalent, long before Manchester itself boomed in the nineteenth century to become a great Northern regional capital and the new 'Cottonopolis' of the world.³

All these thoughts came flooding into my mind as we approach October and I prepare to travel to Norwich to talk to a Conference - later in the month - on the city's historic appeal. I hope that the Man in the Moon gets to join us. And I will take care not to dine on cold plum porridge, just in case ...

ENDNOTES:

¹ I.A. Opie (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (1951); A. Jack, *Pop Goes the Weasel: The Secret Meanings of Nursery Rhymes* (2010); L.K. Alchin, *The Secret History of Nursery Rhymes* (2013).

² P.J. Corfield, 'Norwich on the Cusp: From Second City to Regional Capital', in C. Rawcliffe and R.G. Wilson (eds), *Norwich since 1550* (2004), pp. 139-66. Also published within PJC website: see <https://www.penelopejcorfield.com/pdf26>.

³ I. Beesley, *Victorian Manchester and Salford* (1988); S. Hylton, *A History of Manchester* (2003).