

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

This Country's Charlie Cooper now delves deep into UK folklore

RURAL MYTHS AND legends have always bewitched Charlie Cooper. "I'm a country bumpkin at heart," the writer and actor laughs from his cottage in Gloucestershire. "I love history and nature – and folklore, in all its forms, just combines those things."

There weren't any mythical beasts or pagan sacrifices in *This Country*, the pastoral sitcom he co-created and starred in with his sister Daisy May Cooper, but there's definitely some connective tissue between that show and his latest documentary series for BBC3. *Charlie Cooper's Myth Country* (get it?) sees the 35-year-old Bafta-winner exploring some of the UK's more eccentric myths and legends, from Black Shuck, a giant dog that's said to roam the hills of East Anglia, to UFOs over Wiltshire.

Though he'd always had an interest in all things folkloric, Cooper reveals that it was the making of *This Country* that really fuelled his passion for these agrarian myths. "I came across so many peculiar rituals and traditions, and it just opened my eyes to a whole new world," he says. "We were really analysing our upbringing and the characters around us and the stuff we did, and that's all folklore, really."

For this series the actor travels the UK in his converted AA camper van to visit, in his words, "weird little historical places". The documentary, made up of three half-hour episodes, is clearly a labour of love for the actor, and he's an endearingly wide-eyed host, talking to everyone from Black Shuck eye-witnesses to crop circle devotees. Anyone, he says, "with a strong connection to our pagan past".

It's a timely series. In recent years, there's been an explosion of folk horror movies and TV dramas, stories that plug into ancient traditions and the mystery and menace of the British countryside. Cooper believes this resurgence of interest in folklore and our far-away past has a lot to do with us wanting to break free from an increasingly hurried and noisy world.

"Everything's so hyper-connected now and we spend most hours indoors watching screens," he says. "We've disconnected from our environment, and folklore helps us go back to what it means to be human. We're so lucky to live in a country that's so rich in history, and there are so many weird little folk traditions and rituals. And if this encourages people to visit the places we went to, I'd love that."

There's a scene in the opening episode where Cooper attempts to film a meeting

of the Norfolk Folklore Society. The group is wary at first, but soon charmed by Cooper's unfeigned passion, and the show itself approaches all these stories with an open mind, however fanciful or far-fetched.

"There have probably been TV crews that have taken advantage and shown these people as cranks and nutters," Cooper admits. "But I think we do live in a world where, because there is

'TV has shown these people as cranks, but there's a folk revival'

such a folk revival, we're talking about paranormal stuff more. So it feels like we've created more of a safe space in recent years for different voices. With this series, we didn't want it to be where you got loads of celebrity friends on board and you go to weird, haunted places – I want it to be authentic."

THAT SAID, COOPER'S famous sibling Daisy May does pop up, gently poking fun at her brother over Zoom.

It may not be the full Cooper reunion *This Country* fans have been waiting for, but Charlie does let slip that he and his sister do have another project in the offing.

"I can't talk about it too much, but it'll be an unscripted thing," he teases. "It's a good way of getting back to working together again. What's nice, since *This Country* finished, is that now we have a relationship outside of work. She had a baby a few months ago, so we go around to hers every Sunday for a roast, and the kids play together. It's nice not having that external

pressure. We're not talking about work, we're talking about stupid stuff, and I really cherish that."

But what of *This Country* itself? Though the Cotswolds-set mockumentary aired its last episode in 2020, it didn't definitively close the door on cousins Kerry and Kurtan Mucklowe.

"You can never say never," Cooper says now. "It often crosses my mind; what Kurtan would be doing now. What would they have done during Covid? Would he be a big germaphobe now? Kurtan is such a big part of me, and as I've had two kids since *This Country* ended, I'm always wondering what he would be like as a dad. It would be criminal not to revisit it."

Charlie Cooper's Myth Country starts on Friday at 9pm on BBC3

THE LORE OF THE LAND
Charlie Cooper is keen to explore our rural myths

