

THE HORNED WOMAN OF CHESTER

A CITY AS ANCIENT AS CHESTER IS BOUND TO
HAVE GATHERED UP SOME ASTOUNDING TALES
WITHIN ITS TIME-WEATHERED WALLS.

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Local folklore has been passed down by word of mouth; whimsical legends have sprung up around real-life events until it's impossible to separate one from the other. Sometimes, however, historical truths prove to be far stranger than any fiction could be.

One such tale concerns Mary Davis of Saughall. A humble midwife, born around the turn of the 17th century, she achieved a very unusual kind of fame. Mary, you see, grew horns.

In her late twenties, Mary began to suffer from tenderness at the back of head; then, at age 28, an odd lump appeared. This was thought to be down to her wearing a rather tight hat, and she learned to live with this protuberance for the next few decades.

However, as she entered her sixties, something bizarre occurred... a horn – long, thin, and gnarled – began to grow out of the lump.

After a couple of years, this horn fell off. Soon, though, another appeared, thicker than the last. When this one also cast itself off, a complete pair formed. Over time, Mary grew and shed a number of these miraculous horns.

As farfetched as it may sound, sebaceous horns are actually a rare medical condition (search on Google images, if you're brave enough) where a skin lesion occurs due to a build-up of compacted proteins.

The "Horned Woman" went on to become something of celebrity: given the public's insatiable appetite for all things odd at that time, Mary left Saughall for London, where she made the best of her curious ailment by exhibiting herself at The Swan at Charing Cross.

Well-to-do collectors saw her horns as rare objects, and they ended up making their way into various curiosity cabinets of the day. It was thought that a member of the nobility even presented a horn to the French king, Louis XIV.

Three portraits are known to have been painted of Mary, one of which is still in the possession of the British Museum, although a horn it once owned is now lost. Across the pond, California's Museum of Jurassic Technology displays a strange-looking horn, which it alleges belonged to Mary, though there's no way to prove it. As for the rest, it's likely we'll never really know where Mary's horns have ended up today.

It's not clear what finally became of our Horned Woman either, but she is one of the many, many remarkable people and larger-than-life local incidents from across the centuries that make Chester such a weird and wonderful place to call home. 🦄



Mary Davis · Saughall · Chester