

## *folkonwight*

### **Island Folk History**

Adapted from *Cock & Bull Stories: Animals in Isle of Wight Folklore, Dialect and Cultural History* (2008), by Alan R Phillips

## **RATS**

Rats were also thought of as uncanny creatures with a foreknowledge of death and misfortune, perhaps because, like mice, they are associated with the soul.

The Newtown version of the Pied Piper story – the colourful character who rid the town of its rats then took the children too when the town reneged on the deal – is probably another 19th century imitation of its more well-known German counterpart by that inveterate Island storyteller (as well as story inventor) Abraham Elder, though he refers to the legend being "still rife among the neighbouring inhabitants", and it is just conceivable that he picked up a local version which had never previously made it into print.

Muggleton Lane at Limerstone is all that remains of what was once the home of Richard de Miclignite in the 13th century, whose name was derived from Old English *miclan tune* 'at the large farm'; however, he would not have been too pleased to learn that 'muggleton' also came to be used as an Island name for a rat, albeit probably only in nursery stories. The extraordinary name *Ratt* – standing for Rat Farm – which is cited in a tithe settlement for Arreton in 1631, appears, however, to be less about the creature than a derivation from Old English *ryt*, 'rubbish for burning', an intriguing enough derivation in its own right, though no doubt the locals would have made the most of the name's rodent-like development! A 'drip' signified a home-made trap to catch rats or mice by precipitating them into the water to drown them. And all vermin became 'varmunt' in Island dialect.

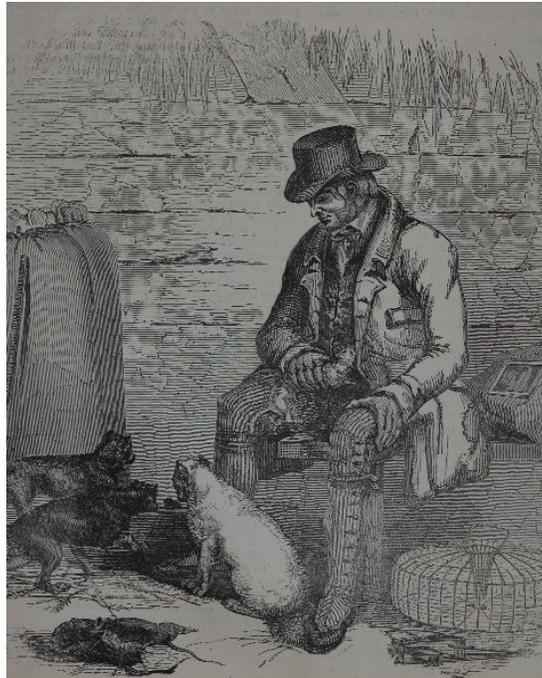
In the early part of the 20th century the Brooke & Mottistone Sparrow and Rat Club was in full swing, in an effort to control both species, as even sparrows were considered vermin at this period. An account for payments made survives:

278 Rats Tails @ 2d each

54 Sparrows Heads @ 3d per dozen

12 Sparrows Eggs @ 1d per dozen

But by 1921 parish minutes for both Brook and Mottistone indicate that the Club was being wound down. However, the rat problem was one that never really went away, and by 1931 the curiously named Tertius Nobbs, Superintendent of Rats and Mice Destruction, was submitting regular reports to the County Council, including one in October with a request that an advert for National Rat Week be inserted in the County Press - one could be forgiven for thinking the rat was being celebrated!



**Ratcatcher and terriers - note the ferret in the ratcatcher's hand**

Bob Cassell of Brook tells an amusing story in *An Eventful Life* of an incident whilst working as a boy at Seaview Dairy, near Compton: "The butter was made in a great wooden churn every Wednesday. One day when I took the cover off I found a blessed great rat in the butter with its tail sticking out... I just got some butter pats and scooped around the rat and got him out with a little bit of butter all around him. I gave it an extra good wash after that. A local grocer used to take the butter, he had a butter round at Freshwater. The following week he came and said, 'Whatever did you do to your butter last week, Mrs Cheek? I couldn't get enough of it. Everybody was crazy for it'. I can see that rat's tail now".