



Above: The wall Humpty Dumpty is said to have sat on

NURSERY rhymes are one of the delights of childhood. Unlike fairy tales, there are no 'lived happily ever after endings', dancing princesses or frogs that turn into princes. But their repetitiveness, sing-song rhythms and outlandish characters never fail to enthrall young children.

Yet lurking beneath these seemingly innocent verses are undertones of a darkly adult nature. Indeed, nursery rhymes were never intended for children, apart from those which serve as a tool for learning the alphabet and counting, such as *A was an Apple Pie* and *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*.

It is thought that these rhymes are fragments from ballads, prayers, proverbs, street chants and tavern songs. The nursery rhyme was often a convenient way of expressing views that were against the church or monarchy and, curiously, many of the best-known nursery rhymes have their roots in Essex.

Colchester, once the capital city of England, was originally called Camulodunum. Its third century king was Cunobelin, none other than the mythical Old King Coel,

who was deemed to be a merry old soul. His jovial disposition was possibly because the marriage of his daughter, Helen, to the Roman emperor, Constantine, brought about peace.

King Coel's palace was thought to have been on the site of the Temple of Claudius on which Colchester Castle is built, while St Helen's church is named after King Coel's daughter, who was said to have built the church herself.

She is famed for having spread Christianity and supposed to have brought back the Holy Cross on which Jesus died, from Jerusalem. Arguably she has been the town's patron saint for over 1000 years and her son, Constantine the Great, was the first Christian Emperor of Rome. It is likely however that this nursery rhyme was written in the 18th century and did not originate from the 3rd or 4th centuries.

Ring a Ring o' Roses; a nursery rhyme so often chanted in the playground, is associated with the Great Plague of London in 1665. The give-away being: 'Atishoo! Atishoo! We all fall down', which refers to the vast numbers of people who died.

When the disease arrived in Colchester, it killed four and half thousand people – half its population. 'A pocket full of posies,' is believed to be a reference to the concoctions of flowers and herbs used in an attempt to rid people of the plague.

One of the main ingredients used was eryngo (also known as sea-holly), which was once abundant along the Essex coast, and thought to be a medicine to cure all ills. It was the Colchester apothecary, Robert Buxton, who realised its potential, and the herb became greatly prized by royalty.

Ordinary people who couldn't afford a doctor would visit his apothecary shop where herbs, spices, animal-innards and insects were crushed, baked and powdered. In 1973 archaeologists made a great discovery of pots that once belonged to Robert Buxton at Lion Walk in Colchester.

'*Sing a Song of Sixpence* with its four and twenty blackbirds baked in the pie,' may seem bizarre to us, but in Tudor times it was not unusual to have bird pies. Rooks, blackbirds and sparrows were made into pies together with plenty of onion and bacon. There is even

Rhyme and reason

Dig deeper into the words of some of our children's favourite nursery rhymes and you will soon discover a world that is less than cute and cuddly.

Susan Hegedus reveals the reason behind the rhyme



Above: Hot cross buns from as far back as 1905 hang from the wooden beams of the Bell Inn Pub. The hanging up of hot cross buns (known as hock-a-buns in Essex) baked on Good Friday was supposed to have protective and curative powers.
Left: The Bell Inn pub at Horndon-on-the-Hill

an ancient festival day for rook shooting on May 12, which used to be celebrated in the villages across Essex.

In 1670, Hannah Woolley, who lived near Newport Pond, wrote a bestseller: *The Queen-like Closet*, which was probably the first published cookery book written by a woman and featured boiled blackbird! 'A pocket full of rye,' refers to the special Essex rye bread called maslin bread, which was made with a mixture of rye and wheat flour, and was popular until the 18th century.

The surprise ending: 'Down came a blackbird and pecked off her nose,' may be a reference to Anne Boleyn having her head chopped off. When she was Henry VIII's mistress, they were said to have met secretly in Rochford Hall.

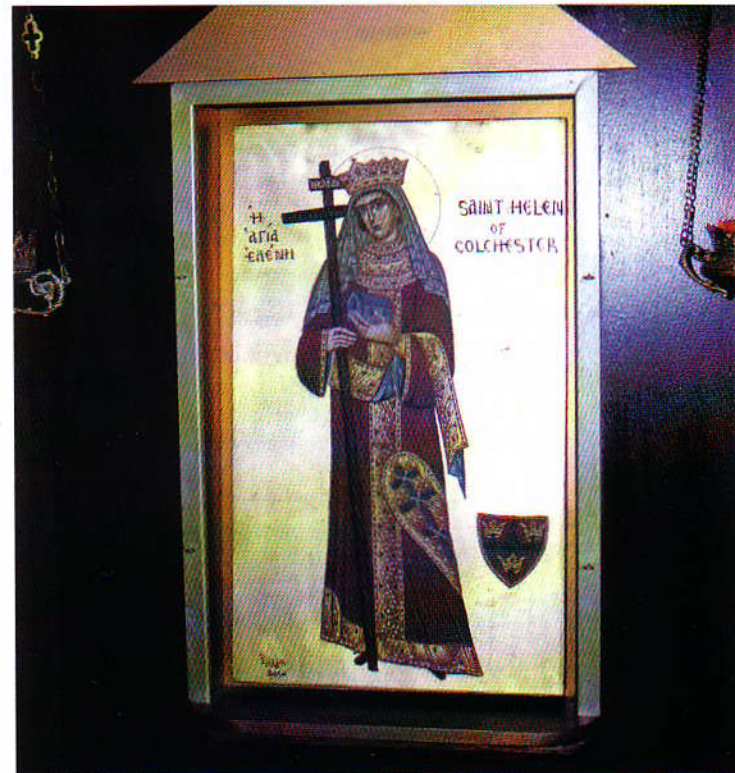
The lovable goblin-like character, Humpty Dumpty, was actually a vast cast iron cannon mounted on top of the wall at St Mary's Church in Colchester. It was used as a defence for the city in the Civil War (1642-49), which was a parliamentary stronghold captured by the royalists. The royalists were the King's men who tried in vain to mend the cannon; thus the famous

lines: 'Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall; Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the King's horses and all the King's men; couldn't put Humpty together again.'

Initially, *Humpty Dumpty* was a universal ancient folk rhyme about an egg falling, which may have been associated with pregnancy. But in this case, it emerged with new words and became an anti-royalist chant. It wasn't until Lewis Carroll characterised Humpty as an egg in *Alice in Wonderland* in 1865, that he became popular and today Humpty Dumpty frequently describes a clumsy or ungainly person or, more unusually, a beer and brandy cocktail.

The actual word, nursery rhyme, was invented in 1824. In spite of Victorian starchiness, they insisted on a sugar-sweet view of the child. It was felt that these ditties should be innocent, devoid of any political codes, although a few innuendos still slipped through the net. Oral tradition was set aside and books written specifically for children came to the forefront.

One of the charming characters who frequently illustrated and narrated nursery rhymes was that bossy broad-beaked matriarch, Old



Above: Inside St Helen's Church is a beautiful icon of St Helen carrying the church she is supposed to have built. Quite by accident I found myself attending part of a sung-service (in English). Amid wafts of incense I was invited to kiss a fragment of St Helen's bone encased in a glass box and light a candle, a spiritual experience not to be missed