

## Parish Magazine Article May 2022

Raven by Michael Blencowe of the Sussex Wildlife Trust

May 14th 1264. The aftermath of the battle. Two thousand corpses lie strewn on the slopes and riverbanks around Lewes. Some view this as a victory; for others this is defeat. But for a large, black bird who has calmly watched the bloodshed from the side-lines, this scene of slaughter is an all-you-can-eat buffet. Democracy never tasted so good.

Smart birds, Ravens. Way before 1264 they'd realised they needn't waste their energy killing to eat when other less intelligent species can do the dirty work for them. For centuries Ravens exploited man's enthusiasm for resolving quarrels with clubs and swords. Ravenous Ravens dined out at all the finest battlefields, burial grounds, gibbets and gallows.

Hanging around with corpses would get anyone a bad reputation but the Raven's took on mythological proportions. Across the northern hemisphere the bird became respected and revered by many cultures as an omen of death, denizen of the afterlife, messenger of defeat. This sinister CV secured them a plethora of portentous appearances in everything from the Old Testament to Game of Thrones. The sight of a Raven struck fear in the heart of man who would dare not harm it. Today Ravens still occur in our folklore as the earthbound spirit of King Arthur, and at the Tower of London the birds are entrusted with the fate of the kingdom. Yet aside from all the make-believe malevolent accolades bestowed on the Raven, it truly is magnificent to watch. As befits Britain's wickedest bird, the Raven certainly dresses the part in a costume of sleek, glossy black feathers, shaggy 'beard' and stout dagger beak. It commands the sky; wheeling on wide wings and uttering its guttural 'cronk cronk' call. Sometimes their behaviour is incongruous with their evil image. To see Ravens rolling and tumbling through the air during their joyous display flight is like catching the grim reaper doing the hokey-cokey.

When not busy instilling fear in the population, Ravens performed an important clean-up job ridding Britain's towns of rotting rubbish and the bird was protected by royal decree. But in the 17th century people's perceptions changed and for centuries the birds were persecuted. Ravens, and the old beliefs they represented, were exorcised from England. By 1895 they had vanished from Sussex. But informed, tolerant attitudes have recently allowed Ravens to return. They mostly breed on our chalk cliffs and quarries but can be seen flying over our towns and cities. In our comfortable world of surround sound and selfies there is something reassuringly sinister about watching a Raven circling overhead; a spectral souvenir of our brutal, primitive past. Sussex will never again be the site of a bloody revolutionary battle. But there's no harm in a few Ravens hanging around. Just in case.

*Sussex Wildlife Trust is an independent charity caring for wildlife and habitats throughout Sussex. Founded in 1961, we have worked with local people for over half a century to make Sussex richer in wildlife. We rely on the support of our members to help protect our rich natural heritage. Please consider supporting our work. As a member you will be invited to join Michael Blencowe on our regular wildlife walks and also enjoy free events, discounts on wildlife courses, Wildlife magazine and our Sussex guide book, Discovering Wildlife. It's easy to join online at [sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/join](https://sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/join)*