

Simon Armitage's 'Lockdown' and Ted Hughes's 'Churn-Milk Joan'. Social distancing in the 1600s.

British Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage, has written a poem for the current world COVID-19 crisis. 'Lockdown' was published in *The Guardian*, 21 March 2020:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/21/lockdown-simon-armitage-writes-poem-about-coronavirus-outbreak>

His story of Derbyshire's Eyam's Boundary Stone, with its holes into which villagers quarantined during plague times would put their money to pay for provisions from outside, has a parallel in Ted Hughes' poem, 'Churn Milk Joan' (*Remains of Elmet* p. 59. THCP 470).

Churn-Milk Joan is a standing stone high up on the bleak moors above Hughes' birthplace, Mytholmroyd. It dates from about 1600 and was possibly a boundary stone. Local folk-lore tells of a milkmaid, Joan, who froze to death in a snowstorm whilst delivering milk. Hughes is dubious about the story, thinking 'Joan' might, perhaps, be a corruption of "jamb" ('jamb' is defined as a vertical column defining an opening, a door, a window - a place of entry and exit, which would be what a boundary stone marks).

"Foxes killed her, and her milk spilled

Or they did not. And it did not"

A British Library Add Ms. 88918/29/10 has an alternative version of this poem in which *"Not even I believed / It was the land-mark memorial / Of Joan's little death"*

In both poems the indentations in the stone are for vinegar which would purge any cash left there of germs:

*"Farmers brought their milk this far, and cottagers
From the top of Luddenden valley left cash
In the stone's crown, probably in vinegar,
And the farmers left their change."* ('Churn-Milk Joan')

*"Your reached up, groped for the coin / In the gritty hollow crown / Took it, and put in one of
your own, if you had one"* (Ms 88918/29/10)

It seems that people still put money in the hole on top of Churn-Milk Joan. A Mytholmroyd Walkers website has photographs of the stone:

<http://mytholmroydwalkers.org/churnmilkjoan.html>

Fay Godwin's evocative photograph of the stone appears opposite the poem in *Remains of Elmet* ('Churn-Milk Joan and Grouse Butts, Wadsworth Moor', Faber, 1979, p. 58) but is not included in *Elmet* (Faber, 1994).

And there is a short experimental film about a walk to the stone at

<https://vimeo.com/389458364>

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Ted Hughes Webpages: <http://ann.skea.com/THHome.htm>