

I thought it was just me. You see, from an early age I was taught about the Pudsey Treacle mines. They're plausible enough to a still growing mind, I mean they dig coal up out of the ground, and salt and even, at a push, potatoes and carrots, so why not treacle? After a particularly humiliating game of 'animal, vegetable, mineral' where I was the only child insisting that treacle was extracted from seams several hundred feet under ground, I realised— my very own personal rite of passage— finally, it was just me. Yes, in later life, when the world of work beckoned I was gifted with extreme cynicism and thus inoculated against the rookies' quest for the long short rod, dehydrated water or double-sided transparencies, but on balance I could have done without the particular childhood trauma of teh treacle mine. I thought it was just me.

And then, you know what, forty-six years later, thanks to the wonders of the internet, I discovered, apparently not. It wasn't just me. Britain, has a whole treacle mining industry, with pits not just in Pudsey but also in, Wem, Talskiddy, Bisham, Nuneaton, Chobham, Tongham, Tadley, Skidby, Ditchford, Crick, Burtle, Newton Abbot, the counties of Somerset, Devon and a place called Dunchideock; not forgetting the village of Wymsey, where not only the treacle mine is a made up fib, so is the entire village. Who would have thought that so much of what lies under our feet in this country was once devoted to the mining of molasses? It's a surprise the Industrial Revolution ever happened at all. No time to dig up coal, we're fracking for golden syrup.

Locally important in England, treacle mining has never, it seems, been a global industry; instead they have drop bears in Australia, spaghetti trees in Italy, the jackalope in the US (which is a rabbit with antlers) and of course, north of the border, the mountain-dwelling, fleet-footed creature known as the wild haggis. Wild Haggis was formerly the staple of Scottish haute not oat but haute cuisine, the staple of Scottish haute cuisine, at least it was until bright spark down south in Slough invented the Mars bar.

Why we invent silly little tales with just enough plausibility to fool the very young, I'm not sure: perhaps it amuses the grown-ups, perhaps it teaches us to be sceptical and enquiring, a little parsimonious with our trust and more savvy on the street.

You and I know that treacle mines and jackalopes, spaghetti trees and wild haggises are not true.

And there are some who will tell you that's what we should think about what we think about Christmas.

'Ha! Christmas! Angels, shepherds, wise men and stars: you're not going to catch me out that way!' As if they are somehow more perceptive, more intelligent, less gullible than that lot in church. Christmas? Well yes, there are some rather fantastical elements to the story, though, strangely enough it's the most extraordinary part of it all- God becoming incarnate- that seems to raise the fewest eyebrows. So it's easy to scoff at angels and virgin births, wise men on camels and donkey rides to Bethlehem, but it's also rather patronising and just a tiny bit insulting to think that because Christians believe this stuff, we are some how two pennies short of a sixpence, critical faculties on standby, easy prey to conmen, ready to swallow any shaggy dog story no matter how far fetched.

Well I don't know about you, but I think I've got a nose that's really finely tuned by now: I can recognise a fishy tale at ten paces, and Christmas just doesn't smell like that. Even as a child you probably only half-believed in the tooth fairy and even Santa: you knew it was probably your parents who removed the tooth or delivered the presents. You sort of wanted it to be true, and so pretended it was, but you knew, somewhere that it wasn't.

But Christmas? Look into your heart, look inside and ask yourself the question 'Is it true?'

The answer is surprising. No impartial history books to back you up. No scientific experiment to prove it and yet, in your heart, implausible as it all is, you know it is true.

And how fabulous is that?

Happy Christmas.