

Birch and folk-lore

The lady of the forest

Folklore of the Birch abounds. It is known as the 'Mother tree' because it was the first to grow after the ice age retreated, hence it is associated with fertility. In Russia the Birch is known as the lady of the forest. In Norse tradition, it is associated with Freya – the lady of the forest. In several countries, any talk of ghostly white fairies or apparitions can inevitably be linked to the ghostly white bark of the Birch.

The head of the besom broom is traditionally made from Birch; hence there are many associations with witchcraft as well.

Springtime festivities often revolved around the 'bounds' of the parish or farm holding being beaten by a Birch branch, which was said to drive out evil spirits, allowing fertility of the land to thrive, a request to the spirits of the land for a full harvest. The traditional Maypole is made of Birch, taken from the woodland at the break of day and danced around in another fertility ritual.

Birch branches once adorned the church at Whitsuntide as symbols of rebirth, renewed life after the winter, possibly because they bear both male and female flowers on one tree, and were often given to those who are newly married to ensure fertility. In many places, girls would give their lovers a twig of Birch as a sign of encouragement. For a long time the "Besom Wedding" was considered legal and even in the 19th century many Irish navvies still regarded it so. A besom of Birch would be held at the doorway of their house, the couple would jump over it and then they were wed.

Babies cradles and rattles were often made of Birch, for the protection against all things evil, and to protect against the faery realm, who would often exchange a human child for a changeling or faery child.

The Birch is also connected to the fly agaric mushroom, the preferred 'shroom' of the Shaman, with the fungus fly agaric found predominantly in Britain growing beneath a Birch tree.

Birch twigs have been used for flogging criminals and lunatics with the intent to 'drive out the evil spirits'.

In Siberian funerals, the clothes and grave of the dead man were brushed with Birch twigs to purify them of evil. Birch bark was laid over the graves and sometimes Birch trees would be planted at the grave.