

WHAT DO YOU FEED A MERMAID ON? AS

By **IVOR
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IT WAS midday when the group of astounded country folk saw a ghost rider in the sky.

His horse was galloping at full speed through the clouds, pursued by an eagle.

When the bird darted at his head, he let go of the reins and fell. Eagle, horse and man were never seen again.

True or false? You can decide for yourself. But a local paper reported in 1818 that it happened in the Hampshire village of Hartfordbridge, near Basingstoke.

WORDS

Seventeen years later newspaper readers were told of a similar incident.

On a Sunday evening, villagers of Chewton Menage, near Bath, saw in the sky a regiment of cavalry with swords drawn.

One woman was so frightened that she became seriously ill.

Today we would probably put such events down to mass hysteria. But strange things did happen in Britain's rural areas.

That much is clear from news From The English Countryside: 1750-

1850 (Harrap, £8-95), a collection of bygone newspaper reports compiled by Clifford Morsley.

In 1838, for example, readers of the *Cambridge Chronicle* were treated to a report of a cricket match played near Halstead, Essex, on a frozen lake.

All the players wore skates, and the fielding, wrote the reporter, was "highly amusing."

Other stories include that of a Devon woman found by the police with a gander wrapped in a towel inside her bustle; a man "eaten to death" by maggots; and a party of amateur sailors throwing chunks of boiled fish to what looked like a mermaid.

Readers of the *Hampshire Courier* in 1814 may have tut-tutted when they read of a man who led his wife to market in a halter and put her up for sale. A tradesman bought her for five shillings.

BURIED

The papers were full of stories about people finding hidden treasure.

There was the case of

Tom Page, a carpenter from Ewell, near Dover, who dreamed that a huge sum of money was buried in a local hill.

He and his friends scrambled up the hill and started digging. They found two large copper boilers containing coins 700 years old.

Tom's neighbours were amazed since he could neither read nor write, and could not have found out about the treasure from history books.

TRIAL

An odd court case was reported in 1817 by the *Kentish Chronicle*. It con-

cerned a man accused of attempting to seduce a housemaid.

His "trial", before a jury of fellow-villagers, took place in a pub.

SUSPENDED

He was found guilty and sentenced to be hanged by his heels from a beam in the bar for 20 minutes.

He was also ordered to drink four pints of strong onion broth—two before the hanging and two while he was suspended.

The man was so shocked that he tried to escape. But he was caught, and the sentence was carried out.