

The Legend of the lost land of Lyonesse

Lyonesse was the name given to the fertile stretch of land between Western Cornwall and the present day Scilly Isles by romantic poets. It was previously called Lethowsow. It is recorded in the Saxon Chronicle that in the year 1099 there was a very high tide and drowned many towns. Many believe a tidal wave covered Lethowsow at this time with only its peaks remaining visible. These became the Scilly Islands. Trevelyan on his white steed was the last man to reach the coast of Cornwall alive and the Trevelyan family still have on their coat of arms a white horse emerging from the sea.

The following story is based on this Legend of the Lost Land of Lyonesse. If you want to find out more about Morwenna and Raw, read *Wolfchild*, my novel based on this legend.

The Lost Land of Lyonesse

retold by Rosanne Hawke

Once there was a place called Lyonesse. The Cornish used to call it Lethowsow but the poets began calling it Lyonesse and so it stayed. Lyonesse stretched all the way from Land's End in Cornwall to what are now called the Scilly Islands. Some people have said some strange things about Lyonesse – that it was where King Arthur was buried, or that the people who lived there were taller than usual, beautiful and very brave. Another said only women lived there and they also were brave and beautiful. It was said there were 140 churches, and the land was more beautiful than any other.

But I think the people living in Lyonesse were the same as you and me. Let's say there was a girl called Morwenna, her mother and father, a grandmother called Eselda, and an uncle, Talan, who lived in a small hamlet with a few other families. Lord Trevelyan lived there too in the manor house. He had a wonderful white horse called Nicca that Morwenna dreamt about. Sometimes she dreamt she was flying on Nicca. She even made up songs about him:

*You must have sprung from the Kelpies' sea,
the spell you're weaving washes over me.
Waves swashing, waves crashing all around me.*

Every day Morwenna dug in the garden and collected herbs from the woods. She collected wood for the fire too. There used to be her brother to help with the chores, but he left when he was thirteen to fight in the war a long way away – it was called a crusade. Morwenna helped milk the cow and feed her and threw scraps out for the dog that barked all the time. Her father ploughed the land and Morwenna helped sometimes and sang to keep the oxen walking. Her father sowed the seed by hand and when it was time, he cut the hay with a scythe and let it dry in the sun in stacks before he packed it in the barn. If it rained during harvest, the hay or grain got wet and they had nothing to eat.

At night, Morwenna helped cook the food in the pot. It was usually made out of vegetables or dried peas and was called pottage. If she didn't watch it, Du the cat might put his head in it, or the dog might tip over the cheese she helped make that day. Her grandmother, Eselda, made sure Morwenna did the right things, and every night Morwenna helped her put the loom away. Eselda made the cloth from the sheep's wool. In this story it is the year 1099.

All year the weather had been very strange, raining all the time so that the harvest had not been good. Morwenna's uncle, Talan, helped by bringing fish to eat.

'It's harder now to catch the fish,' he said one night. 'And where I tie the boat the water is getting deeper. The sea is rising.'

No-one said anything for a while, then Eselda said, 'It will be the end of the world, you'll see.' Not everyone believed her, but Lord Trevelyan said it would be wise to take the cattle and sheep to Cornwall, just in case the sea rose and covered all the land. Eselda said the people should go to Cornwall too.

Morwenna's family packed all their things: the black cooking pot and stirring spoon, their wooden bowls and goblets, the flour her mother had ground at the mill, the loom, their straw stuffed mattresses, and put it all on the cart behind the two oxen.

They were almost ready to go. Talan was bringing Eselda out to the cart when Morwenna couldn't find Du, the cat. 'Du, Du,' and she went to find him. All the way into the woods she went, looking.

Suddenly the ground began to shake and tremble, the wind to blow so strongly that Morwenna had to run not to be knocked over by it. She still couldn't find Du nor would he come. Maybe he went back to the cottage, so Morwenna returned, only to find that water was covering the garden, and lapping the front step of the cottage. Where she stood on the road the water covered her cloth shoes. And the cart – it was gone! Her family had left her. What would she do now?

Suddenly she heard a skidding in the water on the road, a whinny.

'Come, child.' It was Lord Trevelyan on Nicca, his white horse.

'I can't find Du, my cat.'

'Your family have him, and that barking dog. They know I have come for you. They will be almost to Cornwall by now.' He took Morwenna's hand and pulled her up behind him on top of Nicca's wide back.

Now Morwenna was flying – Nicca galloped so fast, and still Lord Trevelyan urged him on, faster, faster. Once she looked back and she saw a huge wall of black water rise up high in the sky, hovering before it crashed down on her cottage. Wooden beams flew up like matches and even the old oak tree floated in the water as if it were made of cloth. Morwenna couldn't tell if the spray was from the water splashing round them or the rain from the sea that had suddenly decided to roll in the sky.

Lord Trevelyan shouted for Nicca to gallop faster still, for now the water was seeping along behind them, finding lower parts of the ground to fill. Nicca climbed into the high places and Morwenna could see villages below, surrounded by water and filling fast, sheep floating upside down. The church bells rang in the wind as the water raced over their steeples.

On and on they galloped until Morwenna could see a castle on a mountain.

'We're nearly there,' shouted Lord Trevelyan, and just then the water found them; it began swirling round Nicca, pulling at Morwenna. It lapped up to her waist and her tunic and shawl were soaked. They were almost to the mountain when the water suddenly grew deeper. Nicca was floundering, stumbling.

'Just a little more.' It took Morwenna a moment to realise Lew of Trevelyan was shouting to the stallion. She sang out loud:

You must have sprung from the Kelpies' sea;

the spell you're weaving washes over me.

Waves swashing, waves crashing all around me.

Her high lilting tones rose higher than the wind. Nicca strained his ears forward and suddenly they were climbing. Waves were crashing round them now, soaking Morwenna's tunic and shawl. She looked behind – there was nothing but grey sea, swirling and seething as if it was cold and hungry and looking for more to eat.

Just as the water washed over Nicca's back, he began to swim. Then Morwenna felt a jolt as Nicca's hooves found land, the rocks at the edge of Cornwall. He climbed up and burst out of the sea, spray flying from either side of him.

Lord Trevelyan helped Morwenna down and there were her family – her grandmother was holding Du. When they looked out to where Lyonnesse had been, all they saw was water, and some mountains in the sea.

Even today the Trevelyan family has on their coat of arms a white horse rising out of the sea for Lord Trevelyan was one of the last people to reach Cornwall alive before Lyonnesse was lost to the sea.

Now read the novel, *Wolfchild: a Year and a Day*



St Michael's Mount, Cornwall