

# THE EASTER BUNNY – “THE ANIMAL THAT NO ONE DARE NAME!”



The quote above is a line from a late 13<sup>th</sup> Century poem giving 77 names for the hare, most of which are abusive but which show a fear and respect for the hare. The poem was written as a charm to be recited when a hunter went out to catch a hare and had to be said on first seeing the hare. If recited properly, the hunter had power over the hare and could catch it.

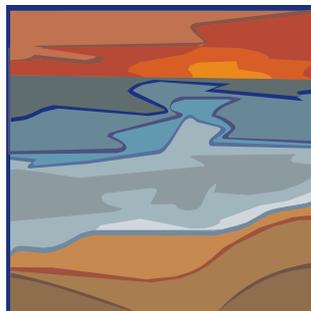
So why did a hunter need such a charm against an animal as defenceless as a hare?

Hares have a vast and ancient mythology from all around the world and, strangely, many people still believe it. Here, in Europe, you can buy a chocolate ‘bunny’ or a chocolate egg at Easter, the last remains of an ancient belief in the egg-laying Spring Hare. (The Easter Bunny is really a hare!) The beliefs behind this are very old and come from the period before Christian spring festivals.



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In Europe, the goddess Eastre was worshipped as the goddess of dawn, with the hare being her attendant animal spirit. Eastre brought light at the dawn of the year and the hares carried it. Christianity simply adopted the timing of Eastre’s festival, (as it did with the Yule Ceremony for the celebration of Christmas), and it continued to use its pagan name of Easter. The association between spring, the New Year and fertility are found in the the hare and the egg; think about that as you tuck into your chocolate during this Easter holiday.



Much of the magic associated with hares was to do with ‘shape-shifting’. That is the ability of a human to change into an animal and

back to a human whenever they wished. It was usually thought to be witches who did this for spiteful reasons. There are stories of the witch as a hare from all over Europe and they were believed until about a century ago.



Most of these stories have similar themes, to do with a spiteful witch who goes out to do evil to her neighbours in the form of a hare, which cannot be caught by ordinary hunting methods. Some kind of charm had to be used to allow the hunter to overcome the witch’s powers and to wound the hare.

There are local stories like this from Easington, Castle Eden and Sedgefield. Charmed hounds were able to follow the hare, which makes a dash for the home of an old woman. Just as the hare is about to escape through a hole in the door, one of the hounds wounds it. When the hunters open the door, they find an exhausted and wounded old woman – the witch changed back from the hare.



It is possible that these witch stories come from prehistoric religions when men dressed up in animal skins and imitated them in order to be able to hunt them successfully.



Add to this the long-standing pagan worship of the moon, with the hare as an attendant of the moon goddess, then you have a very powerful body of magic, myth and legend which made the hunter fear the hare and afraid to say its name. He needed a charm to help him in his hunting.

