

How Nottinghamshire's "Goat-em" village became New York's "Goth-am" City.

The first edition of the Gotham tales was written by the mysterious 'A.B. of Phisicke Doctour' and published in 1540. A.B.'s chapbook featured twenty short stories, each self-contained and no longer than a paragraph, all varying degrees of bonkers, but with no linking narrative or context. Some of the stories had appeared elsewhere in manuscripts from as far back as the twelfth century. More were original, as far as historians can tell, at least as far as appearing in print. Who knows how far back and how often they might have been recounted over a pint?

The same twenty stories were reproduced time and again in new editions, often under different titles. Sometimes they were the tales of *Wise Men*, sometimes of *Mad Men* and sometimes *Fools*. Then, in the late 1700s, they suddenly became located in the reign of King John and transformed into a lot more than the sum of their parts, possibly on the back of the popularity of that other great yarn set in the same period, Robin Hood.

Some surmise that *The Merry Tales of the Mad Men of Gotham* was no more than a joke book. If so, it wasn't very funny. Others believe it was simply a collection of 'rural myths', distant cousins of our urban ones. What matters is that they survived the centuries, became known internationally and took pole position in the ever-growing, worldwide mythology of communities feigning insanity for some urgent collective purpose. That line goes back at least as far as the Ancient Greeks.

So in 1807, when American essayist and all-round scallywag Washington Irving was looking for a name for the fictional city (that was so obviously New York) to lampoon in his new column for the satirical magazine *Salmagundi* he chose Gotham. He thought it appropriate, Gotham being Anglo Saxon for Goat's Town, and having recently returned from two years trolling through Europe's best social circles, he knew all about the Mad Fools.

Both the name and Washington Irving gained traction. Washington went on to become one of America's most imaginative short story writers, including *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle* among his hits. Gotham went on to adorn the facia of numerous jewellers, delis, laundries, bookstores and movie theatres. Long before Batman appeared on the scene in 1939, New Yorkers knew their hometown had a new nickname. Given that New York is properly called New York City, it didn't take a blinding flash of inspiration to add City to Gotham for readers to realise the caped crusader was actually working their home turf.

Why "Goth-am" rather than "Goat-em"?

Well, they're Americans, aren't they? Different country, different language, but when the Gotham Parish Council failed in their bid to be twinned with NYC in

1999, it was nice of Gotham City's Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to drop them a line acknowledging "the cultural and historical link" between the two.

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