

A grin without a cat

ROB GANDY offers up a long-cherished theory about the origin of a familiar phrase

One of the most popular characters in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is the Cheshire Cat, who acts as Alice's companion. He has a habit of suddenly disappearing and so Alice asks if he could disappear more slowly. The cat does as he is asked, disappearing bit by bit until all that is left is his smile, causing Alice to say "I've seen a cat without a grin, but never a grin without a cat!"

The origins of the phrase 'to grin like a Cheshire Cat' have often been queried, particularly as the saying was not, and never had been, a very common one in the County of Cheshire,¹ and there is no actual feline breed of this name. Lewis Carroll, aka Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, certainly did not create the phrase; it had been cited many times before *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was published in 1865. Possibly its first appearance in literature was in *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, compiled by Francis Grose (1788), where the phrase is attributed to "someone who reveals his/her teeth and gums wide open while laughing."² It is mentioned in *The Works of Peter Pindar*, by John Walcot, the poet and satirist, where it is stated: "Lo! like a Cheshire cat our court will grin" (c. 1794/1801). Also, William Makepeace Thackeray in *The Newcomes; memoirs of a most respectable family* (1855) has Mr Newcome say to Mr Pendennis, "That woman grins like a Cheshire cat"; which is then followed by the apparently sarcastic question, "Who was the naturalist who first discovered that peculiarity of the cats in



On the chancel's east wall was a carving of a cat's head

Cheshire?"

There have been several theories as to the origins of the phrase, and these have been discussed on the Internet,³ including by *FT*'s own Karl Shuker.⁴ They can be summarised as follows:

BRITISH BLUE CATS

A breed of cat known for a 'smiling' expression, because of its broad cheeks and upturned mouth. There is conjecture that they moved to Cheshire over time with their people. However, this British Shorthair breed is pretty ubiquitous, and it would be surprising if it was ever closely associated with the county.

CHEESE

Cheshire cheeses were once moulded in the shape of a grinning cat. The county is famous for its dairy production and cheese. As Carroll grew up

in the village of Daresbury in Cheshire, he would be familiar with the local practice of producing cheeses in the shape of a grinning cat. Apparently, a John Cathedral of Chester, whose coat of arms from 1304 included a cat, always bared his teeth in a grin when angry; he was killed in defence of the city, and literally died with a smile on his face. It was in his honour that Cheshire cheese-makers traditionally moulded their cheeses into the shape of cats with a wide grin on their faces.

HERALDRY

The first Earl of Chester's coat of arms was inscribed with the Lions of England, animals common in heraldic designs. Mediaeval artists would never have seen a lion but were required to depict them as snarling, with the result that their efforts resembled grinning cats.

PUB SIGNS

The same argument is made for sign painters when they painted lions on inn signboards in the county.

CARVINGS

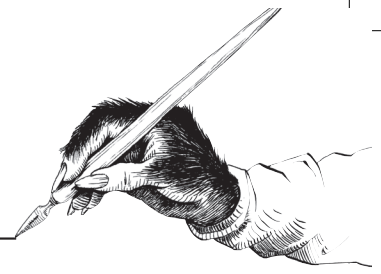
There are several church carvings of lions/cats that are deemed

LEFT: Tenniel's famous illustration of the Cheshire cat from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. **FACING PAGE BOTTOM:** The grinning, cat-like face in St Nicholas's church, Cranleigh. **FACING PAGE TOP:** What happens when you superimpose a grinning mouth on a map of Cheshire.

potential candidates for inspiring Carroll, including at the 13th century St Christopher's in Pott Shrigley, Cheshire, where the crest of the local Pott family was a wild cat. There is a stone effigy of a cat in Brimstage Hall, on the Wirral, where the Domville family, who lived there during the early 1300s, had a coat-of-arms of a red lion rampant. And a carving of a grinning cat peeks out from above the main entrance to St Wilfrid's in Grappenhall, Cheshire, where Carroll's father, a vicar, used to preach.

Interestingly, when Joel Birenbaum (of The Lewis Carroll Society of North America) visited St Peter's Church, in Croft-on-Tees, North Yorkshire, where Carroll's father was rector, he noticed on the chancel's east wall a stone carving of a cat's head, which appeared to be floating in the air a few feet above the floor. When he got on his knees for closer inspection and looked up, the image of the cat was rendered invisible – except, that is, for its carved smile, stretching virtually from ear to ear, which lingered in precisely the manner of Carroll's Cheshire Cat! It is considered that much of *Alice* was set in and around the church and rectory at Croft, but even if Carroll were inspired by the optical illusion of the St Peter's figure, this does not answer the question of why he referred to a *Cheshire* Cat, or why Cheshire cats are supposed to grin.

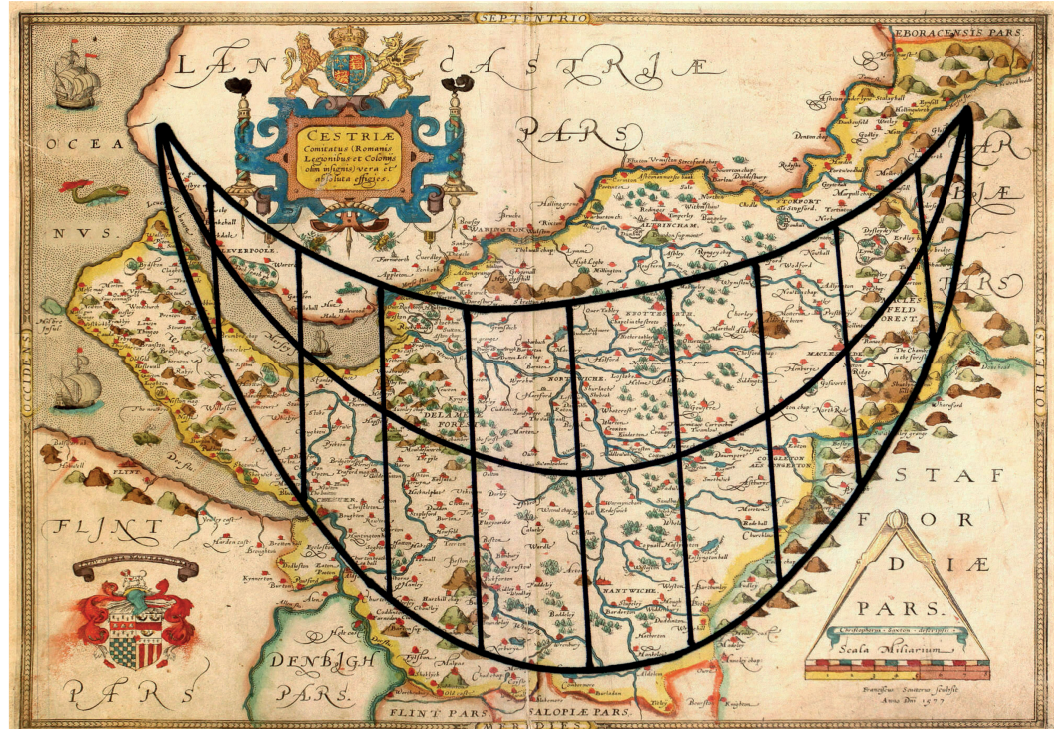
There are other speculations, which may or may not be fairly tenuous, such as: a cat-like gargoyle on a pillar in St Nicholas's church, Cranleigh,



near Guildford, where Carroll lived at one point; a jester named Cat Kaitlin, a Cheshire native, who had a wide smile; a peg-board game; folk memories of the former existence in Cheshire of an ancient cat-venerating tribe called the Khatti; a parable bespeaking the limits of mathematics; the abundance of milk and cream in Cheshire, meaning all local cats were happy, possibly because this enticed rats and mice from ships moored in the docks when Chester was a port; or the wandering Moon, which slowly turns into a fingernail crescent, resembling a grin, before it finally disappears.

Which of these is correct? Well, perhaps none of them – because I would like to offer my own theory, which I have held since my early days (which as I am no spring chicken is a *long* time ago). When looking into this question I was very surprised to find that my personal theory was nowhere to be found, because I was sure that someone else would have had thoughts along similar lines over the years. And my theory is simple: it is that the ‘smile’ actually refers to the shape of the county of Cheshire itself.

Of course, I am referring to the traditional county of Cheshire, which existed before the reorganisation of local authorities that took place in 1974⁵ and would have been what everyone referred to in the 18th and 19th centuries. If you look at a map of Cheshire, you will see that it has its eastern and western extremities ‘curling upwards’, with Hyde, Stalybridge and Woodhead in the East and the Wirral peninsula in the West. The wide, central part of the ‘smile’ is then from Stockton Heath in the north to Audlem in the south. The northern boundary of the county was the River Mersey, and following the northern bank, or even the centre of the river, creates a straighter ‘upper lip’ than if looking at the southern bank, because of where the river significantly widens north of Ince. The picture at top right shows a smile that broadly matches the traditional county



boundaries superimposed on a map of Cheshire. Admittedly, the county boundary makes for the smile of someone that has just had a punch in the mouth, but I speculate that people in the 17th and 18th centuries were likely to have made the same connection as I did in my youth. I then see a saying that someone ‘has a smile like Cheshire’ quickly evolving into that person having a ‘grin like a Cheshire Cat’, because people like to personify sayings and attach them to creatures. And the creature most likely to

be used would be the cat, given that this animal is used in very many idiomatic phrases.⁶ One of these is ‘looks like the cat that got the cream’, which means someone who looks very satisfied or pleased with themselves because they have been successful or done something they are proud of, which links cats with smiles in the popular imagination.⁷ ‘Cheshire Cat’ also has an alliterative element, which would not be the case with other commonplace contemporary animals, such as dogs.

It is unlikely that there will ever be a definitive answer to the question, and no doubt people will disagree with my theory. But my response is to refer to occam’s razor: the outline shape of the traditional county of Cheshire simply *does* look like a smile/grin/grimace. I rest my case.

NOTES

- 1 <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/225170/why-does-a-cheshire-cat-grin-and-how-long-has-it-been-doing-so>
- 2 www.catster.com/lifestyle/cheshire-cat-lewis-carroll
- 3 www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/grinning-like-a-cheshire-cat.html; www.purr-n-fur.org.uk/fabled/cheshirecat.html; www.quora.com/What-is-the-origin-of-the-Cheshire-Cat
- 4 <https://karlshuker.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/smile-on-face-of-cheshire-cat.html?m=1>
- 5 www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1972/70/contents
- 6 <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/cat>
- 7 I tried to track down the origin of this phrase but cannot find one. It is almost certain that it has a long history and predates ‘To grin like a Cheshire Cat’

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