

THE CHESHIRE CAT

BY

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"Grinning like a Cheshire Cat" is a puzzlesome proverb. What is its origin? A writer in "NOTES AND QUERIES" (1895) "traces its origin to the unhappy attempts of a sign painter of that county to represent a lion rampant, which was the crest of an influential family, the Egertons, on sign-boards of many of the inns." In several districts the "Egerton Arms" is known as the Rumping Kitling.

But why only the Egertons? Surely the sign of the Lion Rampant would be much more widespread than merely in that part of Cheshire over which the Egertons bore sway. Ranulph Meschines, the third Norman Earl of Chester bore a gold lion rampant on a red (gules) shield, and his successor, Ranulph Gernons a similar device with the colours interchanged. This red lion rampant was most likely the ancestor of the red cat.

Many a sign painter or mason had never seen a lion, but being informed that it belonged to the cat family, depicted or chiselled the creature as a cat. What was meant to be a snarl turned out a grin.

In the little hamlet of Brimstage in Wirral, there used to be an inn called "The Red Cat," its site now being occupied by the Village Institute erected by the First Viscount Leverhulme, the Lord of the Manor. The Institute sign bears a red cat as a memento.

On the opposite side of the road is Brimstage Hall with its 14th century machicolated tower and the remains of the oratory built by Sir Hugh Hulse and Margery his wife in 1398. It is a stone vaulted chantry chapel, the ribs of the vaulting springing from the capitals of six semi-octagonal piers. In the S.W. corner is a corbel, bearing the likeness of a cat, and from the colour of the sandstone known as the red cat.

Now Lady Margery, before marriage, was a Domville, and the Domvilles were an off-shoot of the Montalts, the Lords of Mold, whose coat of arms was a lion rampant. Later the estate descended to the Troutbecks and then to the Talbots from whom it was purchased by the first Lord Leverhulme. A ceiling boss keeps green the memory of the Troutbecks (three fishes entwined). So surely, the founder family would be remembered also in stone. Hence the lion's head—the red cat. Yes, and it bears a grin, whether through chewing gravel, as a variant of the proverb has it, is for you to decide.