

There's a market town up north with a Norman castle keep,
In the shadow of a hill, overrun with Swaledale sheep.

On the outskirts of town towards the river, to the east,
A chimney tower rises up - three hundred feet at least.

Smoke first soars and pirouettes, a graceful fume-filled ballet.
Smog then sinks and drags its claws across the Ribble Valley.

A quarry lies below the flue, dug deep into the rock.
A railway rattles noisily with trains around the clock.

A bold sign reads 'Cement works. Keep out. Private property'.
It all looks legit, so there's no reason to look properly.

But, rumoured to be living past the gates, in the tower,
Is a legendary beast with ferocious fire power.

Public meetings have been held and rumours strongly denied -
There's no mention of a dragon in the town's tourist guide!

*Voted the happiest place to live - the winner by far,
There's more hair salons than people, and Britain's longest bar.*

*Cowman's famous sausage shop, guided ghost walks in the dark,
Pendle Hill, Tolkien Trail, Last Night of the Proms in the park.*

*Steam trains by the riverside, The Grand and Banana News,
Festivals for mods, for foodies and fans of jazz 'n' blues.*

*A museum by the castle keep, forests to explore,
A sculptor's porridge in a pot, nature walks - and more.*

See? Nowt about dragons. Nor a whiff of the mystery
that surrounds the town's secret - the best-kept in history.

What does the dragon look like? No one can say for certain,
As it's hidden from sight behind a sky-high steel curtain.

Some say it's pea-green. Female. Oval eyes ringed in black.
Others say it's gold. Male. With rigid spines along its back.

There's no doubt at all it has a fine pair of wings,
Though folk north of the border insist they're flying-fish fins.

(They want us to think it's the Loch Ness Monster in disguise,
But that's just supposition - a super posh word for lies.)

II

To filter fact from fiction, to unravel the unknown,
Let's go back to the time King James the First was on the throne.

With a horse, a feather hat, a moustache and a goatee,
He could have been mistaken for the knight Don Quixote.

He was noble. Bold. Heroic. A true courageous king
who feared no one and nothing. Oh, apart from one small thing...

He was petrified of witches, so while he ruled the land,
Broomsticks, spells and magic stuff were out-and-out banned.

Up north this was a problem, since witchcraft paid the bills,
Clothing, food and lodging were all exchanged for magic skills.

So when one day a job came in that seemed oh-so-simple,
A poor old witch in Sabden took it on in a twinkle.

Lizzy Demdike cured the sick with healing creams and lotions,
She combed the land for herbs and plants to use in her potions.

On hearing this, a lonely knight who craved the perfect life
paid Lizzy for her hunting skills to track him down a wife.

'Liz, please find me a princess. I'll treat her like a queen.
She can take things easy while I cook for her and clean.'

Lizzy searched far and wide, scouring the north, south, east and west,
Roaming the length and breadth of Lancashire at the knight's request.

She lit a torch on Pendle Hill, wrote a lonely hearts ad,
Kissed a frog, which was pointless and made her breath smell real bad.

Towing a banner from her broom even failed to get the word out...
Not a peep from a princess - nothing, zip, zilch, nada, nowt.

So she came up with a spell to make a reyt royal lass,
A tip-top princess with northern roots, oozing charm and class.

She lit a fire under her cauldron and donned her black hat,
Waved her wand and danced a jig with her long-suffering cat.

Into the pot went a Brown Cow, two Bucks (Lower and Higher),
A Royal Swan and Three Fishes from the River Wyre.

Spread Eagle, Calf's Head, a Dog, White Lion and a Black Bull,
The pot had space for one more thing and then it would be full.

All Demdike had to do was add an egg into the mix:
an egg laid by a rare northern bird ... the firebird phoenix.

But with nesting season over and theft against the law,
Liz had no choice but to buy the egg from the corner store.

The shopkeeper said, 'I'm sorry, but those eggs are out of stock.
I recommend this substitute, found in a Scottish loch.'

Graciously Demdike accepted, which was her first mistake,
Since fish lay eggs and so do dinosaurs, sea monsters and snakes.

She popped the egg into the pot and in a flash the mass
started to bubble and burp putrid puffs of green gas.

*Splutter, splutter, stinky supper,
Bring to life, send heart aflutter.*

*Fillet of rare bloody steak,
In the cauldron add barm cake;
Muddy soup from the Ribble,
Fire bird and witches' spittle,
Fur and feather, hoof and paw,
Fin and wing fight tooth and claw,
Jungle king and bird of prey,
Man's best friend, catch of the day.*

*Splutter, splutter, stinky supper,
Bring to life, send heart aflutter.*

If you recall, the knight had begged for a bride with royal blood,
But this was no lady that emerged from the mud...

It was small, it was smelly, with a scaly birthday suit.
(To be fair, for a dragon it was pretty darn cute.)

Demdike hitched up her skirt, grabbed the baby dragon and ran.
The knight gave chase, shouting threats to cut short her life span.

III

When the knight gave up chasing and she'd checked to be sure,
Demdike hurried home, drew the blinds and locked the door.

She gazed upon the dragon but, short-sighted in dim light,
She made her second fatal error ... and fell in love at first sight.

She made a vow there and then to be the best mum ever,
To keep it secret, keep it safe, do what it takes - forever.

She conjured up nappies, sewed booties and warmed frothy milk,
Made a bonnet from a sow's ear, with ties of curly-tailed silk.

Its name? *Maleficent* too monstrous, *Falcor* too friendly,
Zog too common, *Smaug* old-fashioned, *Toothless* too trendy.

She needed to think of a name she would never forget.
Our Kid! The perfect choice for flustered mums: her best decision yet.

Our Kid had snake-like skin, talons for toes and a faint yellow hue,
Which became tricky to hide as the baby dragon grew.

She told the townsfolk it was just a really ugly baby,
A little white lie told by an innocent old lady.

Still, Lizzy had an answer if anyone out loud wonder'd...
She said, 'It takes after its mum - and I'm over a hundred!'

One fine day at toddler group, in amongst all the bragging...
Paaarp! A fierce and fiery trump set all the tongues a-wagging.

It was a trump so loud and strong that all the babies cried,
Their teddies left in smithereens, crispy brown and fried.

The next week the dragon belched: out popped a mighty flame.
The mums, irate and badly scorched, knew exactly who to blame.

'Bloomin' 'eck, Liz!' they screeched. 'This time you've gone too far!
Is that a baby dragon? Who on earth d'you think you are?

You've put us all in danger, get out of here. SHOO! SHOO!
King James will go stark raving mad - we're going to tell on you!'

At this point Demdike made her third - and final - error:
a judgement, made in haste, that would change her life forever.

She night-stopped in the castle, as she thought the keep was strong.
Alas, by sunrise the next morning, Our Kid had proved her wrong.

The roof and rafters were all burnt off, timbers smouldering still.
Just walls and steps stood all forlorn, atop a grassy hill.

The locals gathered angrily, their torches burning bright,
And banished Demdike and Our Kid to a wooded greenfield site.

In the blink of an eye, and with almighty magic power,
Demdike built a home for two: a tall baby-proof'd tower.

It rose above the fields, the town, the landscape and the people,
Soaring high in the valley sky, a lofty, cloud-kissed steeple.

A safe haven for a dragon in a gorge cut out of lime,
With a fire-resistant chimney that would stand the test of time.

IV

I wish I could say they lived happily ever after,
In a home that rang out with the sounds of joy and laughter.

Maybe for a while they did, they lived their best lives ever.
Loved each other's company, spent all their time together.

The dragon was home-schooled but preferred burning and baking,
Therefore, much of their spare time was spent redecorating.

They loved to read fairy tales, they tried sewing and knitting,
Enjoyed long walks in the countryside - weather permitting.

One winter's day, it was so wet the sheep shrank in the rain.
Their woolly coats all matted up; just soggy felt remained.

While they shivered and quivered, huddling in vain to keep warm,
They heard an old woman's voice above the noise of the storm,

'Ey, by 'eck, you poor cold souls, come t'ours and have a brew.
Come dry out by the fireside while we knit new coats for you.'

'Let's go, guys,' a wise ewe said. 'What's the worst that could happen?
We can freeze to death out here or chill out with a dragon.'

Eagerly Demdike and dragon put their new skills to the test
and proudly presented the sheep with wool waterproof vests.

A nosey neighbour passing by could not believe his eyes,
As a flock of sheep sat starkers, trying sweaters on for size.

Burning down the keep? Now rudey-nudey sheep? This was the last straw!
Being a prim tattletale, he rushed off to tell the law.

V

Sadly, Lizzy's luck was out, and through no fault of her own
she had to abandon her poor dragon and leave it home alone.

For our dear friend had been accused of witchcraft and sorcery,
Theft (of a flock of sheep) and acting abnormally.

She was taken to jail and locked in a windowless cell,
But hid her wand in her pants to cast just one last spell.

A spell in two parts: first, a dragon childcare solution.
Second, mesmerise the judge to avoid execution.

Urgently she cast a spell on the ants upon the floor.
Bewitched, they scuttled one by one under the jailhouse door.

This army of ants morphed into human volunteers,
Committed to keeping Our Kid safe for hundreds of years!

The first part of the spell had worked - it was a huge success.
The second, I regret to say, was a bit of a mess.

For if you've read your history book you'll know what then took place
in Lancaster to Demdike ... and the outcome of her case.

Demdike tried her best but, by the last day of her trial,
It was clear that mesmerising the judge had not been worthwhile.

'Guilty! Thou art sentenced to death for rustling sheep,
For practising witchcraft and burning down the keep!'

Not one to hang around, Liz waved her wand. *Swoosh! Pooof!* She was gone.
Please don't be sad. Dry your tears! For her legacy lives on.

VI

Fast-forward to the present day. The dragon lives there still -
not by choice, admittedly; it's held against its will.

What was a home built with love to keep Our Kid from harm
is now a giant jail cell: locked, guarded and alarmed.

Over the years the story's changed to fit in with the times:
'It's farmers burning crops' or 'it's gases down the mines'.

Now they swear blind it's just a regular cement factory,
But this dubious cover story is far from satisfactory.

Those trains that are loaded and rumble through the night?
Freight trains, whisking dragon poo to a top-secret site.

They put razor-wire fences up, quote health and safety laws...
The real reason for their hard hats? To deflect the dragon's claws.

The high-vis fluorescent jackets and the steel toe-cap boots?
Show who is in on the secret - the locals in cahoots.

The workers are sworn to secrecy and cannot tell a soul.
They tell big fibs (although they prefer the phrase 'damage control').

The public are invited in each year on Open Day,
Which helps add to the pretence and keep the rumours at bay.

The town crier opens the affair with an, 'OYEZ, OYEZ, OYEZ!'
The ringing bell a loud, clumsy cue to lock the dragon away.

There's a raffle, face painting, and tours around the plant.
It's tricky finding solid proof - hard evidence is scant.

There are diggers and diesels in an effort to look plausible,
All drafted in to ensure the dragon's roars are inaudible.

Hard-working teams keep the dragon safe and ship-shape,
Working back-to-back shifts to prevent an escape.

Sirens wail a warning if the dragon breaks loose.
'We're blasting dynamite,' they say, but it's easy to deduce

that the dragon's flying free, causing havoc once again,
Outstretching creaky wings while surveying its terrain.

Chasing sheep, raiding bars, supping fine champagne,
Scaring kids, popping pills (for a dragon-sized migraine).

But guards blow a whistle the dragon is trained to obey,
So it is back, behind bars, by the very next day.

Under cover of darkness, convoys of lorries arrive,
For it takes truckloads of food to keep the dragon alive.

The dragon gobbles greedily - it's constantly a-snacking
on local grub and fresh farm foods, complete with plastic packing.

Pie and peas from Stansfields, washed down with a brew.
An order placed in the dead of night to avoid the prying queue.

The workers stand at a distance, as far back as they can,
In case the dragon wants pudding ... and decides to eat man.

(Dragons don't often eat Lancashire folk.
They try now and then, but the clothes make them choke.

It may be the wellies, the flat caps or coats,
The wet-weather gear gets stuck fast in their throats.)

VII

This book was due to end here, as all the best books do,
With **THE END** in bold letters - but then, right out of the blue,

Four curious kids, out one day on a fact-finding mission,
Discovered a clue that only confirmed their suspicions.

Most kids can't keep secrets. They can see through lies too.
Life's about to change for our dragon ... but that's for Part 2!

TO BE CONTINUED...