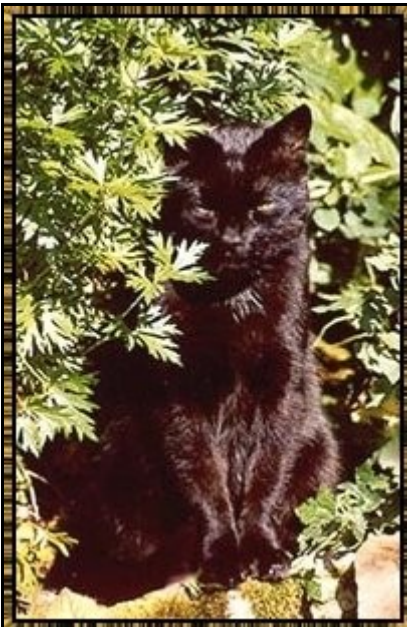




Purr 'n' Fur

FABLED FELINES

Cats in Fables, Fairy tales and Festivals

Articles in *Fabled Felines* are written by
Patrick Roberts

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Possible origins of The Cheshire Cat

(2006)

(Page checked December 2025)

*Please would you tell me, said
Alice, a little timidly . . .
why your cat grins like that?*

*It's a Cheshire cat, said the
Duchess, and that's why.*



The origin of, or inspiration for, Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat has puzzled people ever since *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was first published in 1865, and has given rise to a number of theories — but the truth remains unknown. It could have been that he was referring to real cats, or a coat of arms featuring a cat, or even a family called Catt.

One thing does seem to be clear, though: that Carroll was not the originator of the phrase 'to grin like a Cheshire cat'. The first mention is in Peter Pindar's *Pair of Lyric Epistles* published in 1795, which contain the line:
'Lo, like a Cheshire cat our court will grin.'

Peter Pindar was a pseudonym of John Wolcot, or Wolcott, who died in 1819. Apparently the term 'grins like a Cheshire cat' also has a mention in Goss's Slang Dictionary of 1811, but I have not been able to trace that.

Here, in no particular order, are some of the possible sources for the enigmatic creature.



Chester cats

Cheshire is a dairy county, long noted for its cheese and dairy products, and there used to be a cheese warehouse on the banks of the river Dee in the county town of Chester, when that fair city was also a port. The port cats were said to assemble on the dockside and await the rats and mice that would leave ships when they docked ready to take on a cargo of Cheshire cheese. This made them the 'happiest cats in the kingdom' — hence their grins!

One source says there used to be a monument to the Cheshire Cat on the site of the Chester cheese warehouse, later occupied by Copfield House. The house was demolished in 1979, though, and the last people to live there told me they had no knowledge of such a monument. As neither the Cheshire Records Office nor the Chester Heritage Centre can throw any light on the matter, this — like the origin of Carroll's cat — remains a bit of a mystery.

Cats from Cheshire

An intriguing idea is that British Blue cats, which are known for a 'smiling' expression, are descended from much earlier British cats that may have originated in Cornwall, but moved over time to Cheshire with their people. This fascinating theory was proposed by David Haden of D'Log, but the article is unfortunately no longer available. Lewis Carroll would surely have been familiar with these cats and their 'grins' from his time in Cheshire (see '*Cheese*' below).



Cheese

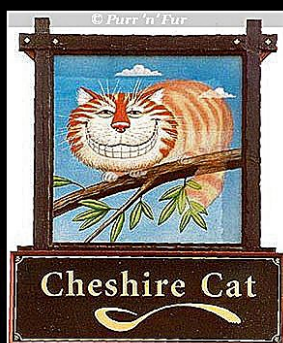
Lewis Carroll, real name Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, was born and grew up in the Cheshire village of Daresbury until he was 11 years old. He would have regularly seen the local cheeses that were fashioned into various animal shapes — one of which was a grinning cat. There are [Lewis Carroll memorial windows](#) in Daresbury's All Saints parish church, and one of them pictures the cat (*below*).



Heraldry

The cat could have been derived from Cheshire's early heraldry; the arms of the first Earl of Chester were inscribed with the Lions of England, for example. Lions were common in heraldic designs, and medieval artists were often required to depict snarling lions — animals they had never set eyes on. What they came up with often looked remarkably like grinning cats!

Inn sign



Rather than a heraldic coat of arms, the cat — by a similar argument — could have come from an inn-sign painter charged with painting a lion (a very common animal on British pub signs), but equally unfamiliar with the real animal. Pub signs [date back many centuries](#) and lions or leopards shown on them were often referred to as 'cats'. One of the best contemporary signs showing the cat as Carroll imagined it (*left*) belonged to the Cheshire Cat inn and hotel at Christleton, just outside Chester; but it has since been replaced by another which, although it

shows a fine cat, looks rather less authentic.

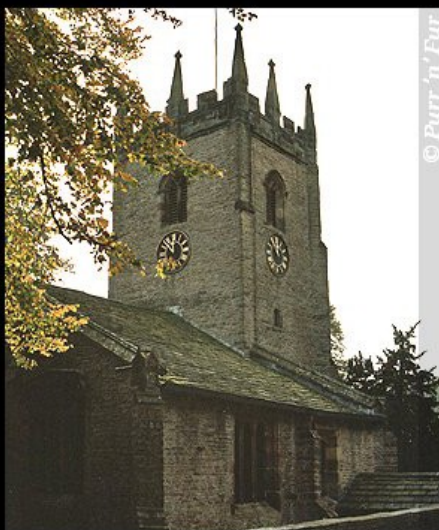
Carving 1

There's a carving on the tower of the twelfth-century church of St Wilfrid's in Grappenhall, a Cheshire village near Warrington. Carroll's father, who was a vicar, used to preach there and the boy would surely have spotted [the cat](#) during his visits. The animal is placed above the main door, but is remarkably difficult to photograph well because of its position and the proximity of the Parr Arms pub next door.



Carving 2

Right over in the east of the county of Cheshire lies the small village of Pott Shrigley, where the thirteenth-century church — [St Christopher's](#) — also has a cat-head carving on the wall inside, close to the pulpit. Might this also have been seen by the young Lewis Carroll?



Carving 3

From Cheshire, Carroll moved at the age of 11 to Croft-on-Tees in north-east England. His father was by then rector of Croft church and Archdeacon of Richmond (from 1843 to 1868). Much of *Alice in Wonderland* is said to have been set in and around Croft church and rectory. In the church is a [sedilia](#) — a seat for the clergy — built into the wall, and at one end of it is the carved stone face of a lion. If it's viewed from one of the church pews it seems to have a wide smile; but looked at from a standing position the grin cannot be seen — so it disappears, like that of the Cheshire Cat.

*Well, I've often seen a cat
without a grin, thought
Alice, but a grin without
a cat? It's the most
curious thing I've seen in
all my life!*



When the floorboards of Croft rectory were taken up in about 1950, some Victorian artefacts were found that could well have belonged to the Dodgson family. They included a white glove — belonging to the White Rabbit?

Gargoyle

Later in his life Carroll lived for some years in Guildford, Surrey, from where he is known to have often visited the nearby village of Cranleigh. St Nicholas' church in Cranleigh has a cat-like gargoyle on a pillar; could the Cheshire Cat have been based on that?

Court jester

One reference I came across suggested there had been at one time a jester named Cat Kaitlin, who hailed from Cheshire, and since people wanted to be as happy as he appeared to be, the term 'to grin like a Cheshire cat' was a tribute to him. The writer admits, though, that all his efforts to verify that such a jester ever existed had come to nought, and so this is perhaps the least likely explanation.

Peg-board game

A very interesting possibility — perhaps even the most likely one — is that Carroll would have been familiar with the 'grin' of the British Blue cats of Cheshire (see '*Cats from Cheshire*', above) and incorporated that into a dice game he invented to amuse his young friends, in the same way that he came up with *Alice's Adventures* to entertain the real Alice Liddell during a summer river trip. He made fantastical references to things that would be familiar to children of the time — and so his peg-board became 'Alice's Cheshire Cat'. As the game progressed on the peg-board the cat's head gradually vanishes, leaving only the grin.



Whatever the truth, Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat continues to entertain and fascinate us. Disney had a film version of him sporting pink and purple stripes (*left*); it is depicted on several postage stamps. A darker and quite different interpretation of the cat appeared in the computer game *American McGee's Alice* of 2000 (*right*).



If anyone knows of any other theories about where the grinning cat might have originated, please contact me!

Further reading

[Alice in Wonderland: on the trail of Lewis Carroll \(archived copy\)](#) by Elizabeth White at Culture24, Feb 2010



Cheshire Cat in gardens of Larnach Castle, Dunedin, New Zealand

Our featured feline at the head of the page: It was with great regret that I decided to let Pushkin be 'put to sleep' early in 2006, following intractable health problems, a gloomy prognosis and a much diminished quality of life. He was a 'rescue cat' of uncertain age, but I would guess 12 years or more. He will be remembered with great affection as a cat with perfect manners: a gentle soul who seemed even more inscrutable than the average feline. There's a small tribute to him at '[Remembering Friends](#)'.

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