

# TALES OF THE EXPECTANT!

Robert Crouch explores the myths  
surrounding birth and babies

If you would like a painless birth, wear a pair of trousers around your neck. According to an Irish superstition, this will lighten the pains of labour and lead to an easy birth. But only if the trousers belong to the father!

Before obstetrics unravelled the mysteries, childbirth was surrounded by all sorts of beliefs and superstitions. It was possible to predict the character or future of a baby, or follow rituals designed to bring good luck and health. For example, babies born on the first day of the month were assured long and prosperous lives — especially those lucky enough to arrive on New Year's Day.

The first day of a new moon was also a lucky time — except for babies born in May. They would suffer poor health throughout their lives.

Character was also influenced by the day of the week on which a baby was born. Sunday babies could look forward to a long life and good looks.

Babies born on Friday were not so fortunate, according to some beliefs, while others accused Wednesday of

being the unlucky day of the week. Eventually, a rhyme evolved to avoid any further confusion:

*Monday's child is fair of face  
Tuesday's child is full of grace  
Wednesday's child is full of woe  
Thursday's child has far to go  
Friday's child is loving and Giving  
Saturday's child works hard for its living  
But the child that is born on  
the Sabbath-day is bonny and blithe  
and good and gay.*

As well as this guide to character, you could discover the sex of your baby by following a few simple rules.

If you gave birth to a boy when the moon was waning, your next baby would

be a girl — and vice versa. But if you gave birth when the moon was waxing, your next baby would be the same sex as the first.

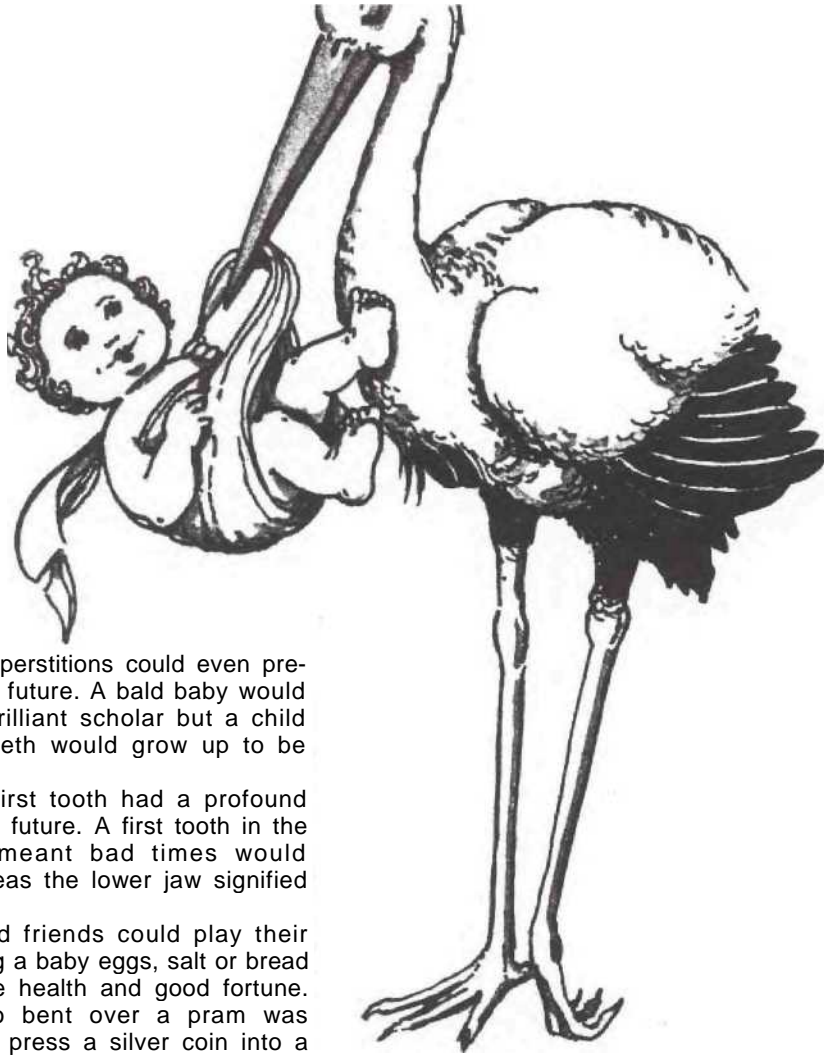
Americans believed that the sex of a baby could be determined in the womb. Boys kicked to the right, girls to the left.

However, if you wanted to influence the sex of your baby from the start of pregnancy, you could wear blue for a boy and pink for a girl.

Clothing became even more important after the birth. A good midwife would always carry an old petticoat with her because it was bad luck to wrap a baby in anything new.

You also had to be careful when dressing a baby. Clothing had to be pulled over the baby's feet as it was unlucky to cover the head first.

It was also customary to get two nightshirts before the birth — a boy's and a girl's. If you dressed your baby boy in the girl's nightshirt, he would grow up to be irresistible to women in later life. Dressing your baby girl in a boy's nightshirt was guaranteed to make the men flock round her when she was older.



**S**OME superstitions could even predict a baby's future. A bald baby would become a brilliant scholar but a child born with teeth would grow up to be selfish.

A baby's first tooth had a profound effect on the future. A first tooth in the upper jaw meant bad times would follow, whereas the lower jaw signified long life.

Family and friends could play their part by giving a baby eggs, salt or bread to encourage health and good fortune. Anyone who bent over a pram was supposed to press a silver coin into a baby's right hand.

A baby who grasped the coin tightly was going to be careful with money in later life. But if the coin fell from baby's fingers, extravagance would follow.

It was just as important to take precautions against bad luck by not washing the first nappy a baby dirtied. In the Orkneys it was bad luck to wash a baby's hands before he was one.

In Wales, after washing a baby for the first time, the water had to be thrown under a leafy tree for good luck. If there were no trees in the garden, rubbing

honey on a baby's head was just as lucky.

In Ireland, you could even spit on your baby to bring good luck! Spittle was thought to have magical powers. If you wanted to remove a birthmark, you had to lick it daily for up to three weeks after your baby was born.

However, the magic only worked if you licked the mark before eating. Kissing a baby's head though was always considered lucky.

The best way to guarantee a healthy future was to carry a baby upward soon

after birth. This was easy if you gave birth down stairs, but in the past it was customary to use a room at the top of the house.

In these cases the midwife would cradle the baby in her arms and climb on to a chair or chest of drawers instead.

Perhaps the most curious belief concerned the cutting of toenails. If you cut your baby's toenails before he reached the age of one, he would grow up to be a thief. Faced with this dilemma, your only alternative was to chew the nails instead!

Mirrors had to be taken away or covered. Babies who saw themselves in a mirror before they were six months old were destined to be unlucky.

You were also tempting fate if you brought a pram or a cot into the house before you gave birth. And under no circumstances were you to rock an empty cradle.

However, another superstition said that if you rocked an empty cradle, it would be occupied within a year.

Similar beliefs could also help if you wanted a baby. You could sit in a chair previously occupied by a mother-to-be, or push an empty pram.

Giving all your baby's clothes away was a sure sign that you would need them again in the future. If a baby looked at you through his legs, you could expect to become pregnant before too long.

Moving to a new house had exactly the same effect. And if you wanted twins you only had to eat a nut with a double kernel!

Should you take this advice and become pregnant, you can then plan for your baby's birth by following the most common superstition of all. As soon as labour begins, throw open all the doors and windows of your house and you will have an easy birth.

Alternatively, you could always borrow a pair of trousers! **A**