

Merryshire Detective Club



By Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan



Pelgrane Press

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Preview



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Introduction to the Introduction

Think of this document as a sampler plate. Imagine the words skewered on little cocktail sausage sticks, or maybe cossetted in little individual bits of puff pastry. Better yet, think of this as the chef dipping a spoon into the still-cooking stew and offering you a quiet taste. Not a full meal; not even a snack, but you'll get a sense of the flavour:

It's cosy fantasy murder. It's Miss Marple goes to Hobbiton. It's *Shires Out*.

We'll be bringing *Merryshire Detective Club* (and an anthology of pre-prepared mysteries and other material, *The Dreadful Hare*) to crowdfunding on a platform near you, soon. In fact, depending on when you read this, it might be happening right now!¹ As you can deduce from the (draft) table of contents, the full book contains a veritable banquet of gamey treats, including sample scenarios, a selection of worthy villagers, and a mighty host of random tables to delight and inspire.



¹ Actually, given the nature of time, it's infinitely more likely that you're reading this in the unimaginably far future. In which case, hello future generations! I hope you're well. Sorry about the mess!



Introduction

In a hole in the ground... they found a body.

I know! Here we are in Merryshire, right in the middle of the beautiful, bucolic Riding, with its neat hedgerows and picturesque taverns and delightful crumpet shops and adorable little village greens, and we've got a murder to solve! It'd be unthinkable if this wasn't the third murder this week. The bodies are just piling up. Better get cracking on this mystery – after a quick snack, of course. No detecting on an empty tummy!

The Basics

In *Merryshire Detective Club* (MSDC if we're being hasty¹), you play amateur detectives in a cosy-fantasy-with-bits-of-Victoriana setting that might slightly resemble a well-known and well-loved intellectual property behemoth. Think Agatha Christie bumping into PG Wodehouse and mistaking him for JRR Tolkien. Your band of plucky investigators solve mysteries (often, but by no means exclusively murder mysteries) that crop up with in your quaint little cosy village.

The GUMSHOE System

At the heart of *Merryshire Detective Club* is the GUMSHOE system². We'll go into the details of the rules later. All you need to know right now is the core promise of GUMSHOE:

If you ask the right question, you always get a clue.

On your character sheet, you've got certain Investigative abilities, such as **Common Sense** or **Eavesdropping**. You never need to roll for these. They always work. There's no chance of failure. There's no roll to spot hidden, or to detect biscuits, or to see if you can decode the mysterious diary. If you have the right ability, and you use it in the right place, you're certain to find any relevant clues present if you look for them.

Of course, you'll still have to work out what the clues mean. You still have to actually solve the mystery, and work out how to bring the malefactors to justice, but you'll never be thwarted by a bad dice roll or an overlooked piece of evidence. You'll never be stuck without a clear line of inquiry.

There are also General abilities, like **Sneaking**. Those ones you've got to roll for.

All you need for *Merryshire Detective Club* is a single six-sided die³. And a nice cup of tea. Maybe a biscuit or two? Go on. Treat yourself. This isn't a game about hard-bitten vampire-hunting spies or nihilistic Lovecraftian investigators who've stared into one abyss too many.

We've got quite enough of those, thank you.



1 But why be hasty? Let's take our time. Have a cup of tea. Stain the margins with jammy fingerprints. Have a nap to digest each paragraph and its associated pastries. It's not like the murder victims are going anywhere.

2 Yes, shoes are in the heart in this metaphor. Roll with it.

3 Sensible cubes, not like those fancy polyhedrals they have out there in the Wider World, with their twenty-siders and d4s and nonsense like that. No, a good honest six-sider is all you need; ideally, go salvage one from that copy of Clue(do) at the bottom of the cupboard under the stairs.



The Riding

So, you all live in the land of the Riding, and it's *lovely*. Green fields, rolling hills, hedgerows, scenic villages, little laneways, quirky little shops, charming eccentrics and salt-of-the-earth rustics, a general turn-of-the-20th-century-only-it's-a-lighthearted-period-drama vibe. Thoroughly delightful and cosy. Springtime brings gentle rain, flowering meadows, crisp bright mornings. In the summer, it's lashings of ginger beer and strawberries and cream and sunshine. The autumns are all harvest festivals and big piles of satisfyingly crunchy leaves and maybe some spooky mists, and winters are *proper* winters, all frosty and snowy and perfect weather for staying inside by a roaring fire with hot cocoa and a good book.

The majority of the inhabitants of the Riding are halflings. You know halflings, of course. Half the size and twice the appetite of Big Folk. They love simple things – good food, good friends, good gossip, juicy scandals. Simple, honest folk.

There are a few other sorts of folk living here, and as long as they don't disturb the peace, they're welcome to stay. Life in the Riding continues much as it always has, with all the urgency of a stunned duck bobbing on a gentle river.

There are rather a lot of murders and other interesting crimes, but on the whole – lovely. Just ignore the murder rate.

Now, *outside* the Riding... well, out there is pretty grim, and dark. News from the Wider World is usually something about dire portents, or dark lords, or prophecies and curses. Things being in thrall to other things, or things being rent asunder. Portals. Dragons. That sort of stuff. All very upsetting.

Let's move on to something more elevating.

Actually, before we do – we should briefly mention *Them*.

Them

There's a reason the Riding is so peaceful, even though the Outside world is full of monsters and perils and dragons and giant spiders and gelatinous polyhydrazes and the like.

It's because of *Them*.

Them are mysterious immortal beings. Call *Them* elves or faeries or gods or whatever you like, but to the folk of the Riding, they're just *Them*.

For their own inscrutable reasons, *Them* keep the chaos of the outside world from overwhelming the Riding. *Them* spent the vast majority of their time in their underground mounds, doing unknowable and quite possibly eldritch things, and rarely interact with the inhabitants of the Riding. It's been a very, very long time since anyone threatened to disturb the peaceful land, so no-one's exactly sure what *Them* would do if foes actually crossed the borders.

The halflings have found that it best not to think about *Them* too much, and set up a whole church to do just that (*The Church of Due Consideration*).

Them don't like magic, by the way. Magic's forbidden in the Riding. No wizards here, thank you⁴. (Note: this means that you *usually* don't have to worry about supernatural elements in your mysteries. If you're investigating a locked-room murder, then you can assume that the murderer didn't teleport in, or was invisible, or anything like that. It's not that there's *no* magic in the Riding, but it's rare enough that it shouldn't be your immediate assumption.)

Something More Elevating

What an unfortunate diversion that was. Best not to talk about *Them*.

Or think about *Them*, for that matter.

Anyway, you all live in a little village that you'll define in collaboration with the GM and the other players. Your characters are a club of amateur detective and mystery solvers. Maybe you came together because of a shared interest in mysteries ("*we all love crosswords, so murders seemed the next logical step*"), or maybe you gathered for some other reason and drifted into mystery-solving ("*we were all chatting in the local pub, and someone said 'I bet Old Farmer Wormy murdered his wife'*"), or you combine mystery-solving with your other shared interest ("*we're the local amateur-dramatics society, so we've got to solve this murder before opening night*").

Whatever your chosen setup, the key thing to remember is that you're *amateurs*. Solving mysteries is not your actual job.

It's just that you're much, much better at it than the bumbling constable.

⁴ Stage magic's tolerated. We shall elide over the edge case of the Amazing Necropants, who pulled zombie rabbits out of a hat and who was assisted by a young lady who had clearly been cut in half several times before. Also, wizards who just hang around being wise and don't actually do any sorcery are all right.



So, you've got to solve the mysteries presented while still being upstanding ordinary citizens of the Riding.

Have a restorative cup of tea, then steel yourself for the Mild Mathematics of Character Generation.

Are you a...



Halfling

Halflings stand about three and a half feet tall - if they have to stand, that is. They prefer lounging. They're a merry folk, fond of life's pleasures - food, singing, and singing about food. Industrious and attuned to the soil and to the rhythms of living things, halflings have a natural talent for agriculture, especially as agriculture leads to food, and food is good. They also delight in parties, fetes, festivals and other gatherings - all these things are a great excuse for a meal, after all.

Society in the Riding is stratified by social class; while no Halfling goes to bed hungry, there's a wide spectrum between 'a supper of gruel' and 'a supper menu so extensive we cannot quote even a fraction of it here', and every Halfling is very much aware of their position on that spectrum. Even the tiniest title, distinction, inheritance or award is of vital importance if it means you're outranking the neighbours. The Riding is lovely and peaceful, but also more cutthroat than a boatful of pirates.

If you're a halfling, you're part of an extended family in the Riding. Halflings have the **Cousins** General ability as their Kin Ability, letting them call up their more useful relatives for help.



Boggart

Down, down, down in the dark, that's where the boggarts live. Paddling around in little boats hunting cave-fish, eating grubs and bugs and mushrooms, muttering and whispering and pottering, always pottering in a sort of Ed Gorey-meets-Ed Poe-meets-Gollum way.

Like their surface cousins, the boggarts are watched over by Them - a different branch, to be precise. A different *season*. If the Riding is cosy and safe and warm and nice as the height of summer, then the patrons of the boggarts are the winter aspect of Them; cold and gloom and rot and ghastly things. The boggarts don't see it that way, of course - to them, the Underworld's just *lovely* and sensible, and it's the world above that's weird.

If there's one trait shared by almost all boggarts, it's being *helpful* in a way that's deeply off-putting. Mention you're a bit peckish within earshot of a boggart, and you might wake up to find the boggart cooking you a lovely bowl of mealworms in your own kitchen. Mention you've got a headache, and out comes the trepanation drill.

Boggarts: so eager to please, so rarely do. They've got their supernatural knowledge of **Bugs and Mushrooms** as their special gimmick.



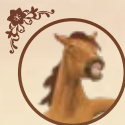


Dwarf

One of those clever, solid outsiders. You know the stereotype - beards, hammers, beer, gold, mines, axes, violence, impenetrable accents. And, honestly, the stereotype is largely true. "Dwarves" and "surprises" aren't natural bedfellows. The one thing we'd quibble on is 'violence': the sort of dwarf who settles in the Riding is less likely to be an axe-waving dragon-slayer and more of a stoic craftsman. Dwarves aren't very personable, tend to be rather humourless and very literal, but are famously solid and reliable. Not just the salt of the earth, but the absolute *bedrock*.

Of course, rocks can crush people. It takes a lot to push a dwarf over the edge, but when it does, they're implacable as an avalanche. Dwarves hoard up grudges and slights for years, until finally it's all too much to bear, and they just *snap*.

If you're a dwarf, you're good at some craft. If you want to play the sensible straight-faced one wading neck-deep through nonsense, play a dwarf. Dwarves have the **Craft** investigative ability, which can also be used to make *magic items*. Dwarf-made, that's how you know it's *quality*.



Pooka

You're a talking animal. A *magic* talking animal, connected in some obscure way to *Them*, possibly in a vague spirit-of-vengeance way. Pooka are very strange. Think Loki as a horrible goose, or Columbo wearing a rabbit suit. If you want to be very strange (but still helpful when it comes to solving mysteries), play a Pooka.

Pooka have the **Pooka Magic** General ability, which does... stuff. Levitation and shapeshifting and illusion and all manner of mischief. Just don't rely on it. In fact, it's generally good advice to never rely on *anything* involving the Pooka.

Once you've picked your kin, you allocate a few points to your Investigative and General abilities, decide on your Business in the village - and pick the Drive that compels you to be an amateur investigator...



Example Investigative Abilities

Investigative abilities are how you gather clues. If you've got the right Investigative ability for the situation, you get whatever relevant information is available. Think of them as ways you interrogate the world around you. Investigative abilities always work. If you have an ability, and use it in the right place, you get the clue (if there is one to be found.) You can also spend points from an Investigative ability for extra benefits that affect the story, make General ability tests easier, or get extra information beyond the essential clues.

The Investigative abilities in *Merryshire Detective Club* include...

Common Sense

You know what sensible people know. You can:

- ☕ Guess what an ordinary halfling would do in a situation.
- ☕ Know basic facts about the Village and the Environs.
- ☕ Understand halfling customs and beliefs.
- ☕ Recall trivia not covered by another ability.
- ☕ Know things and make deductions and connections that your character would reasonably know or make, but you might not because you're (we assume) human and not a halfling living in the Riding.
- ☕ Demonstrate that you're a reliable, level-headed individual who appears trustworthy and normal.
- ☕ Get a warning from the GM when you're about to do something very foolish, like traipsing off to explore the haunted mine – or, when you've mixed up and misinterpreted basic facts.

Common Sense Spends

- ☕ With a **Common Sense** spend, you can *retroactively* do something sensible. Say you've gone off with your mad friends to explore the haunted mine, and now you're trapped by a cave-in. You can spend **Common Sense** and declare that – *of course, like a sensible person would*, you told your cousin that you're going off to explore the haunted mine, and that if you're not back by supper, he should come looking for you. With a sensible pick-axe.

Eavesdropping

You're good at listening to conversations without being noticed. This doesn't mean you're hiding – you don't need this ability if you're just going to sneak in and listen at the keyhole. No, good eavesdropping is all about serendipity – you just happen to be behind the right hedge, or hanging out your laundry when the villains start conspiring in the next garden over. Often, the GM will present eavesdropping opportunities to you. You can:

- ☕ Loiter with intent.
- ☕ Pick up on the most interesting and relevant conversation to listen in on in a crowded market, tavern or tea shop.

Eavesdropping Spends

- ☕ Eavesdrop when the eavesdroppees are inconsiderately soft-spoken.
- ☕ Conveniently recall some fact you previously overheard in passing (*"oh, yeah, one of the servants mentioned they keep the key to the cellars in this drawer"*).
- ☕ If you're hidden while spying on someone, and they're otherwise alone, you can spend a point of Eavesdropping to compel them to monologue, mutter to themselves, or do something else that gives a hint about their state of mind. For example, a guilty poisoner might obsessively scrub their teacups and glasses; a vicar might pray to Them for forgiveness. This monologue won't necessarily give away the whole mystery, but it will give unguarded insight into the thoughts and motivations of whoever you're spying on. That, or you'll find they've been holding in potent flatulence until there was no-one else around.



Underworld

This ability covers two related fields of knowledge. First, it gives you an understanding of the literal underworld – dungeons, mines, caves, sewers, the UnderRiding of the boggarts and the Boggarts who live there. You can:

- ☕ Spot signs that something came from underground.
- ☕ Read maps and plans of underground spaces.
- ☕ Know a bit about geology and minerology.
- ☕ Have a damp, disappointing holiday in the UnderRiding.
- ☕ Navigate the safer bits of the underworld.

More usefully, this ability also covers the metaphorical underworld – the seedy, criminal side of your quaint little village. You know the dodgy halfling who sells illegal cabbages down the one alley in town, or the fellow who has the burglar's mark on his door. You can:

- ☕ Know who might be involved in a particular criminal activity.
- ☕ Behave in a way that suggests you're trustworthy to criminals.

Underworld Spends

- ☕ Take advantage of the underground terrain – luring people to stand under unstable stalactites, or triggering a convenient cave-in.
- ☕ Call on contacts from the underworld; they'll demand something in exchange for their help.
- ☕ Recall the nearest entrance to the Underworld – or, if the GM's feeling generous, decide on the location and nature of the nearest entrance to the Underworld, which can be conveniently close at hand.



Example General Abilities

General abilities are used when the outcome's uncertain, perilous, or requires effort. Most commonly, one makes a **test** of that General ability. A test is a single roll with a binary outcome – you succeed or you fail. (If two characters are struggling dramatically in a way that goes back and forth, such a chase, fight or duel of wits, use the contest rules instead.)

For example:

- ☕ jumping from one roof to another is a **Risky Nonsense** test.
- ☕ picking a lock is a **Mischief** test.
- ☕ resisting the effects of the poison slipped into your tea is a **Health** test.
- ☕ baking a wedding cake in trying circumstances is a **Business (baking)** test.

When making a test, first spend as many points as you wish from your ability pool (you may spend 0) and then roll a six-sided die.

If the total of (points spent) plus (die roll result) is equal to or greater than a target number set by the GM, you pass! Yay!

The General abilities in *Merryshire Detective Club* include...

Sneaking

Halflings (and Boggarts, and Pooka)¹ are really good at hiding; sneaking around under tables and eavesdropping at windows is a key part of any investigation.

To hide, a character must succeed at a **Sneaking** test. The Difficulty of this test depends on the current surroundings (optionally, increase the Difficulty if there are watchful sentries/guard dogs/idle malcontents.) Typical hiding Difficulties:

Typical Hiding Difficulties

Difficulty	Indoors	Outdoors
2	In a junk-filled attic	In an impenetrably dense forest
4	A typical room with lots of furniture	In an overgrown garden
6	A small shed with few hiding places	In a well-manicured garden
8	An empty ballroom	An open field

Now, once a character is hidden, they can stay concealed in that spot for as long as they wish as long as they stay still and quiet. If they want to do something like move about, grab a vital bit of evidence, or sneak away, they do **not** need to make another **Sneak** test. However, the hidden character must pay a Toll to stay concealed. Typically, it's a 1-point Toll if there are people nearby but not in the same room as the sneaker, or 2 if the character needs to stay hidden while there are people in the same room. Bright lighting or a lack of hiding spots can increase the Toll; darkness or distractions can reduce it (generally, to a minimum of 1.)

Sample Tolls

Action	Toll
Tiptoeing from one room to another with no-one watching	1
Sneaking past someone	2
Picking up some unattended evidence	1
Picking up evidence when people are around	2
Picking someone's pocket	2 (and you've got to make a Mischief test)

¹ Dwarves don't so much hide as stand still and get mistaken for rocks.

Sample Tolls

Action	Toll
Unlocking a door or window	1 or 2, depending on how secure it is
Leaving without being noticed	1 or more

The aim of these rules is to have a middle ground between “a successful Sneaking roll means you get to do whatever you want, you’re hidden” and “every time you move you have to test again” – paying Tolls means the character can budget their actions and knows how far to press their luck.

If you’re hidden while watching someone, spending a point of Eavesdropping compels them to act in a way that reveals their inner state of mind.

A character who hasn’t enough points left to pay the Toll can still make a **Sneak** test (typical Difficulty of 4+the Toll). Failure means they’re spotted.



Quick Reference

Festive Calendar

- ☕ New Year's Day
- ☕ Rites of Spring
- ☕ Fasting Flame
- ☕ Squire's Birthday
- ☕ Spring Festival
- ☕ Misrule
- ☕ Opening of Parliament
- ☕ Firework Night
- ☕ Midsummer Rites
- ☕ Summer Festival
- ☕ Squire's Dinner
- ☕ Scholar's Pence
- ☕ Harvest Fair
- ☕ Emergency Day
- ☕ Autumn Festival
- ☕ Pooka Night
- ☕ Themsdays
- ☕ Winter Festival
- ☕ Midwinter
- ☕ Dwarfbbottle
- ☕ Yule

The Day

- ☕ **Too Early (4am-6am)**
- ☕ Dawn (6am-8am)
- ☕ Breakfast (8am-10am)
- ☕ Eleveneses (10am-12pm)
- ☕ Lunch (12pm-2pm)
- ☕ Afternoon Tea (2pm-4pm)
- ☕ Afternoon (4pm-6pm)
- ☕ Dinner (6pm-8pm)
- ☕ Dusk (8pm-10pm)
- ☕ Night (10pm-12pm)
- ☕ **The Middle of the Night (12pm-2pm)**
- ☕ **The Early Hours (2pm-4pm)**

Doing things during **Unreasonable Hours** risks gaining a reputation for Eccentricity.



A Great Many Random Tables for Dessert

Contents of Pockets

Number	Item	Number	Item
11	Mysterious key	21	Components of a disguise
12	Personal letter	22	Unusual hat or other garment
13	Purloined letter	23	Fishing rod or walking stick
14	Daily newspaper	24	Bottle of something drinkable
15	Pocket-knife	25	Bottle of something poisonous
16	Sealing-wax	26	Mushrooms or herbs
31	Unpaid and overdue bill	41	Bunch of flowers
32	Library ticket	42	Party invitation
33	Carriage ticket	43	Cutting from a newspaper
34	Carved stone	44	Business card
35	Picture-locket	45	Something wet wrapped in newspaper
36	Pawnbroker's ticket	46	Suspicious gloves
51	Carriage timetable	61	Spyglass
52	Hand-drawn map	62	Set of lockpicks
53	Iron horseshoe	63	Key to someone else's house
54	Cryptic note	64	Stolen goods
55	Suspiciously large sum of money	65	String, or nothing
56	Cards or dice	66	Gold ring



Refreshments

Refreshments

Once Per Scene

Mending	Limited repair of Health or Respectability
A Cup of Tea	Refresh 1 point of any investigative ability/Health/Respectability.

Once Per Game Session

A Slap-Up Meal	Refresh 4 points of investigative abilities, or 8 points of General Abilities.
A Good Night's Rest	Refresh half your expended points in Health, Mischief, Risky Nonsense, Scuffling, Sneaking and Watchfulness.
Following Your Drive	Refresh 2 points.
Make All The Players Spontaneously Laugh or Applaud:	Refresh 3 points of any ability.
Make All The Players Spontaneously Groan:	Refresh up to 3 points of any combinations of abilities – but gain an equal amount of Bad Luck (p. XX).



A Quick Guide to Some Aspects of the Riding

We go into all this stuff in more (some might say, exhaustive) detail in Chapter 4, but for Players Who Don't Read Stuff, here's the quick summary.

The **Riding** is the thoroughly lovely land where you all live. It's all small villages and quirky market towns, apart from the capital of **Riddleton**. Most of the inhabitants are halflings.

Outside the Riding is a much more standard (and violent) fantasy setting, but the protective power of Them keeps peril and magic out. Them are mysterious spirits/elves/fae/gods. Them don't get out much. Their mounds and stone circles are sacred places to the halflings.

The Halfling aristocracy, the **Squireage**, are supposed to take care of those sacred places, but most Squires are more interested in pheasant shooting or lawn bowls or gambling or alcoholism.

The actual care of the sacred sites is outsourced to the **Church of Due Consideration**. The vicars of the church also handle weddings, funerals and exorcisms.

In your little village, there's a local **Squire**, possibly a local **Parliamentarian** (or, failing that, some other clerk), and a **Vicar** from the Church of Due Consideration. Positions like that are known as **Offices of Note**, and some people think they're worth a murder.

There's also a **Constable**, responsible for keeping the law. The Constable in your village is **useless** and **incompetent** in a manner to be decided by your players, so it's up to your little band of amateurs to actually save the day.

People of the Riding include eccentric **boggarts**, stalwart **dwarves** and magical **pooka**.

And lots and lots of **halflings**. Big Folk are rare here.

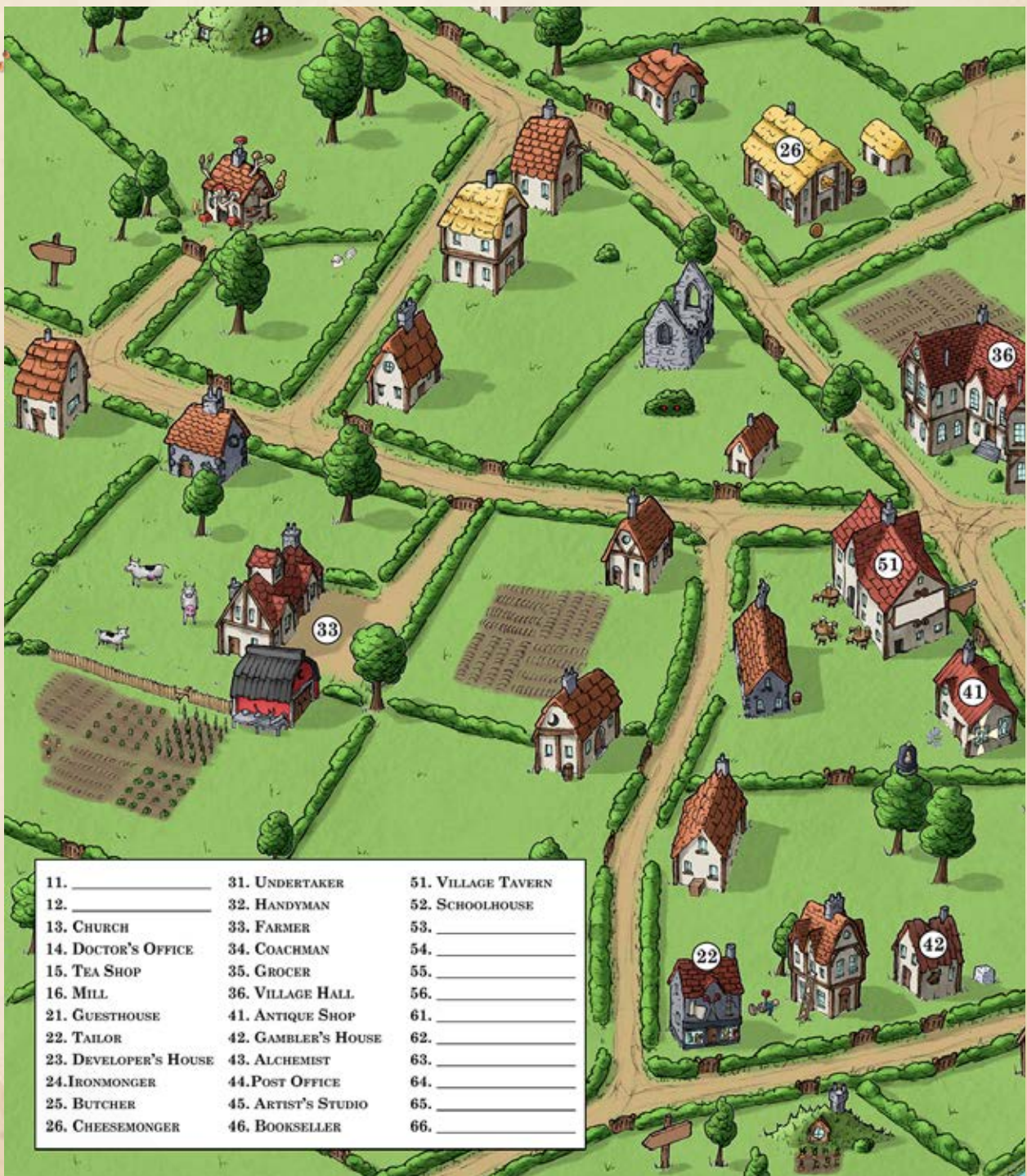
There are all sorts of different mysteries to solve – **disappearances**, **thefts**, **blackmail**, **smuggling**, **intrigue**...

And **murder**.

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Village Map (partial)



- | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| 11. _____ | 31. UNDERTAKER | 51. VILLAGE TAVERN |
| 12. _____ | 32. HANDYMAN | 52. SCHOOLHOUSE |
| 13. CHURCH | 33. FARMER | 53. _____ |
| 14. DOCTOR'S OFFICE | 34. COACHMAN | 54. _____ |
| 15. TEA SHOP | 35. GROCER | 55. _____ |
| 16. MILL | 36. VILLAGE HALL | 56. _____ |
| 21. GUESTHOUSE | 41. ANTIQUE SHOP | 61. _____ |
| 22. TAILOR | 42. GAMBLER'S HOUSE | 62. _____ |
| 23. DEVELOPER'S HOUSE | 43. ALCHEMIST | 63. _____ |
| 24. IRONMONGER | 44. POST OFFICE | 64. _____ |
| 25. BUTCHER | 45. ARTIST'S STUDIO | 65. _____ |
| 26. CHEESEMONGER | 46. BOOKSELLER | 66. _____ |