

Fairies and their kin

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<http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/fairies.htm>

Anno 1670, not far from Cirencester, was an apparition; being demanded whether a good spirit or a bad? returned no answer, but disappeared with a curious perfume and a most melodious twang. Mr W. Lilly believes it was a fairy.

John Aubrey

I did not go to see the exhibition of Victorian fairy paintings at the Royal Academy of Arts (Nov 1997 to Feb 1998). Nor, so far, have I seen Nick Willing's 1997 'adult thriller' film entitled *Photographing Fairies* – not to be confused with a different film starring Peter O'Toole that was inspired by the so-called Cottingley fairies Edwardian trick photographs. However, I am aware that all these projects have led to something of a glut of fairy fare in the media. *The Fairy Ring* and the *National Fairy Appreciation Society* (disbanded in 1998) both report booming interest. So it seems entirely appropriate to devote a major part of this issue of *At the Edge* to looking in more detail at fairies and related phenomena.

But this begs a few definitions - such as 'What are fairies?' and 'What is the difference between fairies and goblins, pixies, brownies, elves, gnomes, elementals and a whole host of other 'little folk'?' And, as if the answers to these two questions aren't tricky enough, what is the difference between fairies (and their ilk) and a whole range of other fleetingly-seen 'supernatural' events such as ghosts, will o'the wisps, earthlights, or even – and the similarities are greater than you might think – UFOs and 'alien abductions'? In this article I will attempt to answer these three questions, although it might be better to say that I will be looking less at the differences between them than drawing attention to the close similarities.

Fairy fundamentals

Up the airy mountain
Down the rushy glen
We daren't go a-hunting
For fear of little men

William Allingham
The Fairies 1850

The English word 'fairy' comes to us, via the Old French *faerie*, from the Latin *fata*, meaning 'fate'. This means the roots are with the classical Greek Fates, who were believed to control the fate and destiny of the human race.

Early fourteenth century English literature appears to distinguish fairies from dwarves (goblin-like entities who lived in burial mounds); from brownies or hobgoblins (who lived in houses near the hearth and performed domestic tasks); and from the fairy damsel or White Lady who was regarded as a benevolent guardian spirit or genius loci (Pemberton 1997). Further on the 'fringes' of such lore were mermaids, water spirits and sundry giants and monsters. Broadly speaking, these Middle English accounts conform broadly to the Anglo-Saxon categories of elves, dwarves and pucks (Griffiths 1996:47–54), so seem to represent some continuity of belief. Nevertheless, the roots of little folk are rather tangled. The notable historian of medieval religion and magic, Keith Thomas concludes that 'Ancestral spirits, ghosts, sleeping heroes, fertility spirits and pagan gods can all be discerned in the heterogenous fairy lore of medieval England' (Thomas 1971: 724). Shakespeare's Titania and Oberon are King and Queen of the blithe subjects of the fairy kingdom forming part of the supernatural spectrum of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Such benevolent fairies have become the current archetype and today's children are brought up to think of fairies as diminutive beings of kindly disposition. However, accounts of medieval fairies show them to have been neither small nor particularly kindly. For many people, fairies were spirits against which they had to guard themselves by ritual precautions. By the Elizabethan era, town dwellers seem to have consigned such beliefs to

the realms of childhood but there is clear evidence that the country people of the British Isles continued to show an 'astonishing reverence' for the fairies and dared not 'name them without honour' (Thomas 1971: 726 citing John Penry's *Three Treatises concerning Wales* c.1773). In 1911, Jonathan Caredig Davies published his *Folk-lore of West and mid-Wales*. No less than 60 pages are devoted to detailed accounts of fairy beliefs. Although he is poor at citing his sources, we must assume that most of these were still current as folk tales in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Also in 1911, W.Y. Evans Wentz published his better-known book, *The fairy-faith in Celtic countries*. This took its place alongside Robert Kirk's *The secret common-wealth* (first published 1815 but written in 1691) and Thomas Keightley's *The fairy mythology* (1828) as the leading works of reference on fairy lore. Despite a substantial volume of literature, the next major study of fairies did not appear until 1959 when Katherine Briggs' *The Anatomy of Puck* was published, which led in due course to her better-known *A dictionary of fairies* in 1976.

Fairies as phenomena

The modern superstition is that we're free of superstition.
Attributed to *Frank Muir*

Ignoring various members of the Theosophical Society (such as Geoffrey Hodson and Dora van Gelder) and the founders of the Findhorn Community, who have written books recounting what seem to be sincere experiences of encounters with a whole host of fairies and fairy-like folk, for most writers in the twentieth century fairies have been approached as folk-lore - tales of 'superstition' with little or no credibility, and in all probability diluted to be suitable as children's bed time stories. A key exception is Janet Bord's most recent book *Fairies - Real encounters with little people* (1997) whose subtitle betrays a far more 'phenomenological' approach. This book surveys a wide range of reports of fairy encounters and reveals a consistency to the tales from both the Old and New Worlds.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that Janet Bord has been the first to approach accounts of supernatural experiences as more than mere folk lore. Back in the early 1970s, David Hufford carried out exceptionally thorough research into Newfoundlanders' beliefs about the 'Old Hag' and other specific types of nightmares; at this time the Canadian island of Newfoundland was isolated from both the Old and New Worlds by a combination of historical and geographical factors, and frequently-adverse weather.

At that time many Newfoundlanders were familiar with the Old Hag tradition and defined it as a dream 'where you feel as if someone is holding you down. You can do nothing only cry out. People believe that you will die if you are not awakened.' (Hufford 1982: 2). Hufford strenuously sifted such dreams from a variety of other nightmare experiences, including hypnagogic hallucinations and sleep paralysis, and concluded that 'being hag ridden' (as the experience was generally known as) was a distinct sleep experience for which the 'primary evidence' came from folk lore.

Hufford's work appeared in 1982 as *The terror that comes in the night* and convincingly showed that 'a significant proportion of traditional supernatural belief is associated with accurate observations interpreted rationally.' I am not suggesting that the Old Hag has any direct relationship to the other 'supernatural' experiences discussed in this article, but I draw attention to Hufford's work as it clearly shows that folk lore may contain accounts of experiences which are otherwise ignored or denounced.

A different study of supernatural beliefs appeared a few years later, when Gillian Bennett's *Traditions of belief - Women and the supernatural* was published in 1987. By interviewing a number of women in north-west England about their beliefs in ghosts, the after-life, and such like, Bennett developed a technique for getting beyond the superficial remarks and making a more objective assessment of how literally (or not) individuals believed in specific ideas. Although Bennett's interviews touched upon ghosts, the real reason I draw attention to this work is because it shows that an individual's belief / disbelief is not just 'on' or 'off', but rather is more akin to part of a spectrum of belief on any one topic - and with complex inter-relationships of beliefs on more-or-less related topics.

Ghosts

Tush, tush. Their walking spirits are mere imaginary fables.

C. Tournour

The Atheist's Tragedy iv, iii

As with fairies, ghosts have a history that goes back at least as far as classical Greece; indeed the oldest-known ghost story appears in the earliest 'book' - the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Most of the dead in ancient Greece, such as those who died in 'normal' conditions and had funeral ceremonies properly done on their behalf, were led by Hermes to cross the river Styx in Charon's boat and then pass into the realms of Hades. But some of the dead (such as those who died untimely or violent deaths, or where the funeral ceremonies were not properly performed) remained trapped between two worlds, and were attracted to the realm of Hekate. They roamed with her during the night and were to be seen at crossroads and near their graves. However, the Greek word *phásma* or *phántasma* was a wider concept than our 'ghost', as the invisible demons associated with Hekate were called *phásmata* when they appeared in the visible world, as were also some liminal 'undead' beings such as Lamia (Gonzalez 1997).

As with fairies, ghosts and boggarts are known by a variety of names in the Anglo-Saxon era. 'In medieval England it was fully accepted that dead men might sometimes return to haunt the living' bluntly states Thomas (1971: 701), noting that the Catholic Church rationalised this belief by regarding such apparitions as the souls of those trapped in Purgatory. Early Protestant preachers treated the belief in ghosts as a Popish fraud. To ask someone in the sixteenth century whether or not they believed in ghosts was akin to asking if they believed in transubstantiation or the papal supremacy. Needless to say, this clear-cut theological issue became greatly diluted in subsequent centuries, suggesting that popular belief in ghosts was not easily passed off as a popish superstition.

We should not assume that previous generations believed in ghosts in the same way that modern day journalism still reports on 'haunted pubs' and the like. Ignoring the obvious 'marketing ploys', the nature of modern ghosts simply conforms too closely to a narrow range of 'idealised scripts', as Jeremy Harte recently showed convincingly for Civil War ghosts (Harte 1997b). David Taylor's article in this issue of *At the Edge* also reveals that haunted houses need to be approached quite differently from the assumptions of many 'ghost hunters'. Preliminary ideas on a 'social history' of ghosts were put forward a decade ago by Peter Rogerson (1987), who observed that 'The traditional Victorian haunted house was the short-lease house where the servants came with the property. The archetypal modern haunted house is the council house. Such house literally "belong to someone else" . . . There is a greater likelihood of a failure of bonding between the occupant and the house.' David Taylor discusses this in more detail in [his article](#) elsewhere in this issue.

At this stage it perhaps enough to simply question the clichés of modern day ghost tales. One more question to ask in passing is to what extent ghosts overlap with experiences apparently missing from Protestant cultures but (as readers of *Fortean Times* will be well aware) still common enough in Catholic countries - to wit, visions of saints and the Virgin Mary. However, John Palmer (1998) has recently drawn attention to a chapel in Mortel, Holland, dedicated to Our Lady of the Wandering Lights which, on the face of it, suggests that there was a difference between a will o' the wisp and a vision of the BVM.

Earthlights

'Search the Truth when, down the dark lane,
Spirits glide and Blue Lights gleam.'

James Jennings

Poems consisting of the mysteries of the Mendips etc 1810 (cited in Quinn 1997b).

There has been a previous attempt to link together various supernatural apparitions from ghosts through 'will o' the wisps' to UFOs. This is Paul Devereux's 'earth lights hypothesis' which was first argued in 1982, with a major updates in 1989 and 1997 (Devereux 1982; 1989;

1997b; Devereux and Brookesmith 1997)

In bare outline, Devereux's earth lights hypothesis argues that tectonic strain in rocks - especially those near to active geological fault lines - can cause anomalous light phenomena. Such phenomena have been recreated under laboratory conditions and there has been sufficient evidence to support his suggestions. For instance, 'tadpole-shaped' lights were seen before an earthquake in Leicestershire on 11th February 1957, and anomalous lights appeared before the earthquake centred on Mounts Bay in Cornwall of 10th November 1996 (Devereux 1997a). According to a Japanese scientist, Yoshizo Kawaguchi (1996), many people reported seeing red and blue lights an hour or tens of minutes before the 1995 Kobe earthquake.

David Clarke's article in this issue of *At the Edge* provides evidence for both earth lights in the Pennines and also for a continuity with folk lore predating any of this theorising. A detailed study of folklore and anomalous lights around Bristol (Quinn 1997b) provides equally convincing independent data linking 'earth lights' with, in this case, both fairy and ghost lore.

Devereux also suggests that poltergeist activity and ghosts, especially the vague white shape types, are another manifestation of the same earth light phenomena. In *Places of Power* (1990: 32-4) Devereux provides clear evidence for links between fairy lore and anomalous lights in Ireland and Cornwall. He has also suggested that earth lights are capable of triggering temporary brain 'dysfunctions' (such as temporal lobe dissociation), a topic to which I will now turn.

Elf-infested spaces

Professor Michael Persinger and his colleagues at Laurentian University in Canada have spent many years researching 'sensed presence' phenomena (otherwise termed 'ego-alien intrusions') from a neurophysiological perspective. In the search for brain correlates to the experience of 'presences', their studies have focused primarily on the deep temporal lobe structures of the brain, the amygdala and hippocampus, which Persinger characterizes as the most electrically unstable structures in the human brain. By using electrodes to stimulate the temporal lobes, Persinger is able to induce a variety of deeply disturbing mental experiences (some readers may recall a BBC2 *Horizon* programme from 28th November 1994 when the Susan Blakemore interviewed Persinger and underwent temporal lobe stimulation). Such 'temporal lobe dissociation' generates strange visual and other sensations which the brain finds difficult to 'process' - subjects will often describe the sensations as being like someone pulling at their limbs, or even as a sequence of events which resemble aspects of so-called 'alien abduction' experiences. It seems reasonable to assume that the 'alien abduction' experiences (usually obtained by hypnotising the subject [1]) are 'invented' by the brain in a similar manner to the attempt to make sense of temporal lobe dissociation. A recent issue of *Fortean Times* (No.108) includes a useful overview of temporal lobe research and its relationship to anomalous experiences.

Devereux and Persinger have collaborated to explore the possibility that the anomalous energy seen as earthlights might have sufficient electrical energy to cause temporal lobe dissociation. Perhaps more relevant to this article is the recognition that many of the sensations induced by temporal lobe stimulation are akin experiences with some types of psychoactive plants and drugs. According to Dr Horace Beach (1997), auditory hallucinations - closely resembling experiences generated in Persinger's experimental subjects - are a common experience with high doses of psilocybin ('magic mushrooms'). As many readers will be aware, magic mushrooms and some other psychoactives, such as DMT, also readily lead to visions of little people - not for nothing has Terence McKenna (1992) described these imaginary worlds as 'elf-infested spaces'.

Other researchers have indicated that such experiences are cross-cultural. Julia Phillips (1998) reports that Australian Aborigines from New South Wales recognise traditional 'guardians of place' whose descriptions tally closely with her first-hand encounters with an 'archetypal' British elf or fairy in 'old' south Wales. Kevin Callahan at University of Minnesota claims Ojibwa Indians of the American Midwest see 'little people' for about thirty minutes during hallucinations induced by atrophine-containing plants from the Deadly Nightshade

family. Callahan also notes that those in the second stage of alcohol withdrawal (i.e. two to three days after stopping drinking) report similar encounters with 'little people' (Callahan 1995).

More speculatively, Ralph Metzner (1994: 286) has suggested that the obscure Scandinavian Aesir goddess, Bil, was once regarded as a 'henbane fairy' - on the basis that the proto-Germanic word bil originally meant 'vision, hallucination' and there was a herb known to the Gaulish Celts as Belinuntia. The use of henbane was well known to Greek, early German and Anglo-Saxon writers; there is even evidence of henbane from bronze age urns found in the Alps (Graichen cited in Metzner 1994: 286). This may just mean that the rainbow bridge leading to Asgard, Bilfrost, may also have been originally linked to liminal visionary states.

Moving to modern times, I am intrigued that my grandmother, when in her early nineties and suffering from the combined effects of long-term crippling arthritis (she could not stand unaided by then), failing eyesight, and the relatively limited social stimulation of living in a old people's home where the fellow residents were almost all senile (whereas my gran was not senile, although beginning to have slight problems with short-term memory) began to report seeing a 'little boy' who came into her room at various times - often at night, when he would curl up in a chair or at the foot of her bed. Needless to say, children were infrequent visitors to the home and none stayed overnight.

Taken together, there is a variety of evidence to suggest that 'elf-infested spaces' are more common than rational twentieth century thinking would normally accept. Could it be that, as with the Old Hag of Newfoundland, folk lore is providing us with direct evidence of subtle mental states which we are too quick to dismiss as pure fantasy?

Hollow hills and abductions

I explore this suggestion further I would like to delve into the contentious waters of 'close encounters' with aliens and alien spaceships. This is hardly a new suggestion - back in 1984 Ian Cresswell examined the subjective nature of 'close encounters' and their similarity to dream and trance states. Peter Rogerson (1988) picked up on similar themes four years later.



An early chapbook illustration shows what may be meant to be 'little people' dancing in a ring - note the prominent 'magic mushroom' and the door into what appears to be a hollow hill.



Modern media has discovered the potency of strange 'little people' dancing - and living inside a hollow hill.

In issue five of *At the Edge*, Jeremy Harte (1997a) questioned the *folk lore of hollow hills*. Janet Bord (1997: 94–7) shows that the various tales of being 'abducted' to take part in fairy parties inside hollow hills have many similarities to the recent literature relating to 'alien abductions'. The curious similarities between hollow hills and the interiors of Spielberg-like space craft so suggest that the 'pre-technological' age experience is a close match for modern-day 'close encounters'. I cannot help but add that the Teletubbies also live in a hollow hill.

For similar reasons Phil Quinn's 'Toast to the recently departed fairy folk in the Bristol region' (1997a) concludes that 'it is not hard to wonder whether the fairies have in fact not left us but rather undergone a change in identity more in keeping with an eclectic modern world'. I would prefer to turn this around and suggest that certain 'altered states of consciousness' have for millennia regularly lead to visions of 'little people'; we now might prefer to 'justify' those imaginary experiences in terms of 'alien abductions' or even the neurological-speak of 'temporal lobe dissociation', but in previous centuries the same range of experiences were discussed in terms of fairies and a host of names relating to other diminutive beings - and were kept alive in the copious folklore.

The main articles in this issue of *At the Edge* bring together different viewpoints from David Clarke, Jeremy Harte, Elizabeth Oakland and David Taylor. In differing ways they challenge many of the preconceptions which are all-too-easily linked to fairies, ghosts, anomalous lights - and even the nature of 'folklore' evidence. I hope you, the readers, will also recognise that the ideas which are being explored in these pages merely scratch the surface of these inter-related phenomena.

Acknowledgements

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Note

1: It is beyond the scope of this article to dismiss the heavily-promoted claims for alien abductions. A steady series of articles in *Magonia* (Rottmeyer 1988; Ellis 1991; Rogerson 1990; 1994; Goss 1996; Rimmer 1997) have built up a well-argued case for both 'alien abductions' and 'ritual abuse' allegations being the consequences of 'false memory syndrome' induced by what might be regarded as 'leading questions' asked under hypnosis. A summary of this work appeared in *Fortean Times* (Brookesmith 1996). In 1997 Kevin McLure launched a newsletter entitled *Abduction Watch* that deals specifically with 'the irrational muddle of faith and belief that typifies [alien] abductions'. A clear 'deconstruction' of an ostensible alien abduction is reported by Devereux and Brookesmith (1998).

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For those *At the Edge* readers who have not already obtained their copy of Jeremy Harte's bibliography [*Research in Geomancy 1990-94*](#), here is a sample of what he has trawled up from the literature published between 1990 and 1994 relating to fairies and other entities.

The Puca haunts cliffs and holes, according to Deasun Breatnach, 'The Puca: A Multi-Functional Irish Supernatural Entity', *Folklore* 104 (1993) pp105-110. He will knock down a wall which stands in the way of his path; often he pushes a traveller to one side, out of the way of a dangerous invisible host. In Leinster he has become a household spirit of castles, but generally pucas are no longer seen. On the island of Naxos, however, the exotika - mermaids, vampires and demons - are still haunting lonely places. Charles Stewart went asking people about them for his *Demons And The Devil: Moral Imagination In Modern Greek Culture* (Princeton UP, 1991), but was amusingly nonplussed when the villagers decided that as a folklorist, he ought to know, and sought his advice about dealing with them. Nobody was supposed to believe in fairies in 1930s England, but they kept on appearing for all that and are chronicled by David Lazell, 'Modern Fairy Tales', *Fortean Times* 71 (1993) pp39-41. Usually they conformed to the iconography of popular literature, as on London's sacred tree, the Elfin Oak in Kensington Gardens (FT 71 p42). Belief and unbelief play tag throughout Joe Cooper's

The Case Of The Cottingley Fairies (Hale, 1990), a study of photos faked by two Yorkshire lasses in a dawn session down by the beck. These fooled everyone, Cooper included, for seventy years, but after their confession was made the forgers still insisted that the fairies themselves had been real spirits of place. And still they come. *The Good People: New Essays In Fairylore*, edited by Peter Narvaez (Garland Publishing, 1991), has contemporary examples of phenomena such as fairy raths and pixy-leading: it identifies a liminal status in topography as well as culture for the fairies. Good to see that Robert Kirk's fairy hill at Balquidder is still haunted. Barbara Rieth develops the study of American pixy-leading in *Newfoundland Fairy Traditions: A Study In Narrative And Belief* (Institute of Social & Economic Research, 1991). Peter Rogerson, 'Fairyland's Hunters', *Magonia* 46 (1993) pp3-7, 47 (1993) pp4-8 finds that themes of amnesia, time-loss, lampless lights and seduction - common in fairy lore - have been incorporated into narratives of alien abduction which have evolved since the 1940s. Later developments include the prophetic status of abductees. The origin of the tradition lay in fears of kidnapping, but it has been transformed by the supernatural. Nigel Watson's *Portraits of Alien Encounters* (Valis Books, 1991) studies fringe ufo percipients of the late 70s including people whose visions of an alien presence were rooted in particular local landscapes. There is a section on Paul Bennett's boyhood experiences in the West Riding. Nigel Mortimer, 'To Find A Hidden Site: Dowsing The Lost Circle Of Ilkley Moor', *Earth* 15 (1990) pp18-26 tells how a stone arrangement, thought to be a megalithic circle, was located by dowsing. Vibrating sensations were felt from the stones, and figures seen amongst them: anomalous low temperatures as well as dowsing responses were recorded. In 'The Call Of Backstones', *Gloucestershire Earth Mysteries* 18 (1994) pp26-28 he returns to this stone circle, noting how lights and entities were seen at the site and in the homes of those involved. Patrick Harpur sums up in *Daimonic Reality: A Field Guide To The Otherworld* (Viking, 1994). Traditional and modern entities, from fairies to phantom social workers, are treated in a unified theory of the World Soul and of shapeshifting daimons, an otherworldly correlative of Jung's theory of the unconscious. The geomancy of liminal sites is associated with entities.

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Other articles about fairies in *At the Edge* No.10: