

Will o' the Wisp – the fire of fools?

Photographs by Stuart Seager

THE VARIOUSLY NAMED Llanthony Valley or Vale of Ewyas in the eastern Black Mountains has had a special place in my affections since I was introduced to it forty years ago. Not only has it a rich wildlife, but what is loosely called 'atmosphere', even now that a through road has opened it up to continuous traffic in summer. So I was delighted when, some months ago, William Griffiths, who was born in the valley but now lives near Raglan, sent us his account of a personal experience in the 1920s under the title 'Ignis fatuus, commonly known as Will o' the Wisp or Jack o' Lantern'. The Latin means 'foolish fire'.

Mr Griffiths wrote:

'Many years ago I had the good fortune to have a grandstand view of this phenomenon, when I was returning homewards from my youthful peregrinations up the Llanthony Valley. It was a quiet, dry night in late summer, pitch black and moonless, and around midnight. I had dismounted from my bicycle to walk up a short, steep hill and was about to remount when I was aware of an intensely brilliant pumpkin-sized ball of light about 500 yards away to my right, in marshy land rising upwards toward the mountain base. I stood transfixed as the fiery ball moved around in a circle. Suddenly it took off, gathering speed every moment, and raced across the

'THE COUNTRYMAN'
WINTER, 1981. (VOLUME 86. NO 4.)
(J. FRANCIS)



In 1881 Father Ignatius claimed to have had an amazing vision of the Virgin Mary by the hedgerow of this field near the monastery of Capel-y-ffin. Local historian Charles Knight points out to Bruce Campbell and William Griffiths the statue that was erected nearby to commemorate the miracle. But could it have been a will o' the wisp?

first field. There were three tall, overgrown hedges in its path, at least 10ft tall and dividing small fields. It swept upwards and over the first fence in great style, but returned to ground level to cross the next field. It did the same with fence two, and sped away again to fence three and gracefully swooped up and over that one also. It continued, speed unabated, towards a copse, where it came to grief; at least, I did not see it again. I knew the location well because the land was just over our farm boundary, and I could visualise its progress perfectly; its speed was around 20 mph.'

A phenomenon worthy of Ewyas, especially when I remembered that Father Ignatius, who built his monastery at Capel-y-ffin where the valley divides, had recorded visions there some time in the last century. So I got in touch with Mr Griffiths: had he ever seen a will o' the wisp again? No, but he could give me a friend's

account of what happened to his father, who is the 'lad' in the following story from Radnorshire.

'Early one September morning, when it was still dark, a farmer with a lad set out to collect a load of coal from the nearest railway station. The lad led the front horse, carrying a hurricane lamp in his left hand, while the farmer was in charge of the shaft horse. After going for some distance, they became aware of a fiery ball of light, of uncanny brilliance, some way ahead, as if held aloft by someone with a pitchfork, who in a drunken state was bobbing and lurching from side to side of the road. As the distance between them narrowed, the horses became restive. Then suddenly the lead horse reared, tried to turn and in the commotion kicked over the traces. The shaft horse was also almost uncontrollable, as the two men clung to their horses in desperation.

'The light reached them, passed on the off-side and came to a halt in the confined space between waggon and hedge. It took some time to calm the horses; then in anger the farmer leaned over the waggon to see whoever was carrying this strange light. But his anger turned to astonishment when he realised there was no one there: the ball of light was simply suspended in mid-air. As he watched, rigid with fear, the light floated silently through the roadside fence and disappeared. Not long after this encounter the farmer died. Many neighbours believed that his death was foretold on that morning when the "corpse candle" came to meet him down the narrow road.'

I went through *The Countryman's* card index and found only one reference to will o' the wisp under any of its



names, a note published in Autumn 1974 (p. 64) from Miss M. Hughes, who was out one autumn evening when she saw a light travelling across the fields from her 'ancestral farmhouse' in Breconshire. As it approached, it seemed 'as large as one of those old fairground acetylene flares and looked as if it were being carried aloft by someone on a bicycle who lurched from one side of the road to another. Slowly the light approached in this crazy manner, burning ever more intensely as it came. It had almost reached me, when the brilliant flare vanished into the hedge by which I stood.' The morning after this experience Miss Hughes passed a hearse on the same road and 'the wise man of the locality' opined that the coffin must have held one of her old kinsfolk coming home.

The sources I have been able to consult agree that will o' the wisps occur in autumn on marshy ground. These three incidents, from adjacent old Welsh counties, were all autumnal, as were the visions at Capel-y-ffin in August-September 1881. But only Mr Griffiths' personal experience took place specifically on 'marshy ground'. Still, there seemed enough evidence to justify a reconnaissance of Ewyas by Stuart Seager and myself in the company of William Griffiths, his friend Charles Knight, another native of the valley and a mine of information on the area, and Emlyn Evans, a leading Welsh geologist.

At the end of the day we knew a lot more about the valley, had visited five past or present ecclesiastical sites and I had fallen once more under the spell of Ewyas. We decided that the Abbot's Meadow at Capel-y-ffin, where the apparitions of 1881 were seen, could never have been marshy ground and they could therefore be dismissed, in spite of superficial resemblances in what was seen to a will o' the wisp. (There is a full account in chapter XLVI



William Griffiths was born in the Llanthony Valley and looks again at the place where as a young man he saw a vivid will o' the wisp travelling rapidly along a marshy bottom and rising to pass over each field hedge.

of *The Life of Father Ignatius O.S.B.*, by the Baroness Beatrice de Bertouch.) But we visited the scene of Mr Griffiths' experience, close to the river, which is now known as Hodni once more, instead of the more difficult, to English lips, Honddu.

Information about the will o' the wisp (under its several names) is as elusive as the phenomenon itself, which seems to have become much rarer in the past hundred years, perhaps coinciding with the growth of scepticism and the drainage of marshes. The account in *Chambers's Encyclopaedia* (1908) decides that 'several different phenomena have evidently been included under the name'. While some observers describe the flame as fixed, others have seen it 'in motion, bounding rapidly over the country and sometimes rising high in the air', which is a notable feature of Mr Griffiths' account and,

to a lesser extent, of the other two incidents described above. But, as a more modern edition of *Chambers's* puts it (1968): 'It occurs quite irregularly and unpredictably and the descriptions of it differ so widely that the sceptics have suggested that it is a mere hallucination'.

Will o' the wisp has a modern champion in Allan A. Mills of Leicester University, and I am indebted to Robert Anderson of the Science Museum, South Kensington, for showing me Dr Mills's article on the subject, published last year in *Chemistry in Britain*, and several other relevant references. After quoting the accounts of reputable observers, some on the Continent, and going back to Isaac Newton himself, Dr Mills concludes: 'It does seem that the will o' the wisp was a real phenomenon once widely known throughout Europe and North America'. But explanations of it 'have been as numerous as they are unsatisfactory'.

Most accounts suggest that methane or marsh gas is the source of the flame; the difficulty is to see how it could be spontaneously ignited. Dr Mills ranges over the chemical field and describes his own experiments which, though negative in results, have not disheartened him. Dr Anderson believes that ignition is most probably caused by phosphine or hydrogen phosphide traces in methane; 'but it is clear that no definite answer has yet been agreed'. Dr Mills ends his article by inviting readers of *Chemistry in Britain* to help him: 'Is the Will o' the Wisp truly extinct, or does anyone know of a locality where it may still be seen?' What about *Countryman* readers? Meanwhile Stuart Seager and I are happy to think that we have spent a day with one of the last people to have seen *ignis fatuus* in action. □

