



A 1917 fake : Elsie Wright plus little people

## Fairy dale folk

Michael Parkin ventures deep among the Yorkshire Dales with Tinkerbell '86, an expedition of 'sensitives' attuned to the wavelengths of the fairies . . .

TINKERBELL '86, an expedition in search of fairies, stood by a stream in Cottingley Dell, near Bradford. Suddenly there was a shrill cry. Sandra, who can hear fairies, came splashing through the middle of the stream towards us.

"Cows!" she cried. And there, upstream, were a few Friesians, drinking from the stream. After taking a minute to recover, Sandra announced that she was going downstream in her search for fairies. "But there are more cattle downstream," I said.

"That doesn't matter," Sandra said, "Elves — ugly little mannequins, really — usually hover around cows and drink their milk." (The "cows" were bullocks. Titania herself could not have extracted milk from them).

We were in Cottingley Dell because it was here, in 1917, that Elsie Wright, aged 16, and her cousin Frances Griffiths, aged 11, took photographs of fairies. The news reached Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who had his Sherlock Holmes saying: "It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important." Sir Arthur shook the world with his book, *The Coming of the Fairies*, about the little people of Cottingley Dell.

Photographic experts failed to prove that the fairy pictures were fakes. But they were. What had begun as a childish prank became the world's longest-running practical joke, lasting over 70 years.

Elsie, now 85 and very frail, finally told the truth to Joe Cooper, leader of the Tinkerbell '86 expedition. All five photographs, she said, were of cut-outs supported by hatpins.

Frances, who died last month, told a different story. She admitted to Cooper that the first four photographs were fakes, but said of the fifth: "I saw the fairies building up in the grass. I just aimed the camera and took the photograph."

So there we were in Cottingley Dell, looking for fairies. I suggested to Cooper that believing Frances about the fifth photograph was rather like buying a gold brick from someone who had already sold you bogus shares in the Brooklyn Bridge.

"I'm agnostic about the photograph," he said. "I think the girls mucked about with it. But I wouldn't be surprised if it is partly genuine."

Joe Cooper is 62, a loquacious Yorkshireman who runs the psychic research groups to which members of Tinkerbell '86 belong. About 13 women members of the group have seen auras above each other's heads. "I am not psychic. I am an empiricist, a catalyst," he said. "I believe fairies are there to be seen by sensitives. The evidence is in; the day of the open mind is finished."

He has tape-recordings of sensitives describing their experiences with fairies. One unlikely sensitive was Snowy, a sailor who was picnicking on a hill near Gibraltar with his girl friend. A gnome with human features, 18in to 2ft tall, snatched a sandwich from his hand and ran off. The palce, his girl friend told him later, was known as Gnomes Hill.

through the door every morning and glared at him."

She took a fairy with her to one of the psychic study groups. "It travelled in the car with us," she said. "The other woman did not see it."

"In the group I draped my arm along the back of the settee and asked other members of the group if they could see the aura. Most of them saw rippling water, sun and mountains. But three of them saw the fairy. They did not know I had brought it with me."

The fairy did not return home with her. We can only speculate on how it went back — by bus, car, taxi, or by that mystic force known only to fairies.



Cooper: 'We are pioneers'

In Cottingley Dell, Joe Cooper said: "Oak, ash and thorn are fairy vegetation, and this place has all three."

"We are the pioneers of new knowledge," he told his expedition beforehand. "We are happy to be aided now by Frances Griffiths (the child fairy photographer) who has thankfully quit her arthritic body and may give us a nudge here and there."

At least two members of the expedition received a nudge of some sort. Bobby Henderson and Sandra shot ahead of the rest — the one in hope of seeing fairies, the other in the hope of hearing them.

"The fairies won't come out for a coach party," said Mrs Jane Bell, of Leeds. But Bobby Henderson reported that she had "an impression" of two on the stones in the stream. It was "sensing they were there, rather than seeing them".

As for Sandra, she heard "the delicate sound of bells like you would hear on the bell of a cat," above the gurgling of the stream. Earlier, Sandra had described the sound of fairies as "like children heard laughing in the distance, a sound above and beside background noise".

Bells are associated with fairies, if we accept a story told to Cooper after he had given a talk entitled "Tinkerbell, are you aware?" A man in the audience told him that he saw pale pink energy around Joe's chest and pale lavender around his head. A fairy, holding a stick with three bells, fluttered on to his left shoulder. Every time Joe said "Tinkerbell", she hopped on to the opposite shoulder.

The group is hoping to find a horse able to calculate cube roots. This, said Cooper, was a well documented ability, one shared with other animals. Meanwhile they are concentrating on fairies, manifestations of a force Joe calls neo-vitalism.

We are happy to devote these last columns on the last page of this newspaper to the little people. You have fairies at the bottom of your Guardian.





## Henderson: 4ft elves

A nurse told Joe that she had seen a gnome 60ft tall among trees at Bolton Abbey, in the Yorkshire Dales. Another informant plucked a fairy from a spider's web in New Zealand as a child. They were a countryfied lot of fairies in New Zealand, she said.

Because they fear ridicule from insensitives, some members of the expedition would not give their surnames. But one, **Mrs Bobby Henderson**, a Leeds housewife, said: "I have always seen fairies. You see them when they want you to see them."

Mrs Henderson saw them in her garden, fairies 12in to 15in tall, and elves 3ft to 4ft tall. She knew "a very sensitive RAF sergeant" who was wakened each morning by a fairy — "a little man, about 18in tall, who walked