

Straddling a remote part of the South Lincs fens was once an unfinished road, a "mysterious person" asking a local farmer why the track had been left, and promising that he would complete the job there and then if the farmer would turn his back and not watch how it was to be done...

Intrigued, the farmer complied but, being filled with curiosity at hearing tinkering and hammering sounds behind him, swung round to see a huddle of "little men" in caps working like beavers at the site. The scene is then said to have vanished, the trackway remaining derelict and unworkable forever thereafter (FOLKLORE OF LINCS, Gutch/Peacock 1908)

But East Anglia abounds in such tales. There were the notorious little people of Diss in Norfolk, which until very recently would openly visit homesteads in the vicinity. Other legends tell of tenuous beings living in the upper air, of Jack-o-Lanterns and malignant spirits of the marshlands.

Suffolk in particular is steeped in fairy lore. One night a man, trudging the fields near Bury St. Edmunds under an archipelago of stars, stumbled across a group of leaping fairies "bathed in shimmering light". A similar encounter with dancing semi-

# "The Invisible Throng"

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An illustration from "Fairies - The Cottingley Photographs" by EL Gardner. Published by kind permission of the publishers, The Theosophical Publishing House Ltd

luminous figures in a field near Saxmundham was recorded by Joan Forman in her HAUNTED EAST ANGLIA (Fontana 1974). And in 1903 an aged woman interviewed by a journalist described the elfin music - drums, wind and stringed instruments - she had heard as a child at

Elvedon ("Elves Den") in Breckland country, and spoke darkly of the bewitchment of horses and riders who dared loiter in the area after dark.

Fairies were also reputed to aid local witches in their healing and divining arts, according to TUDOR STUDIES (1924); and it is

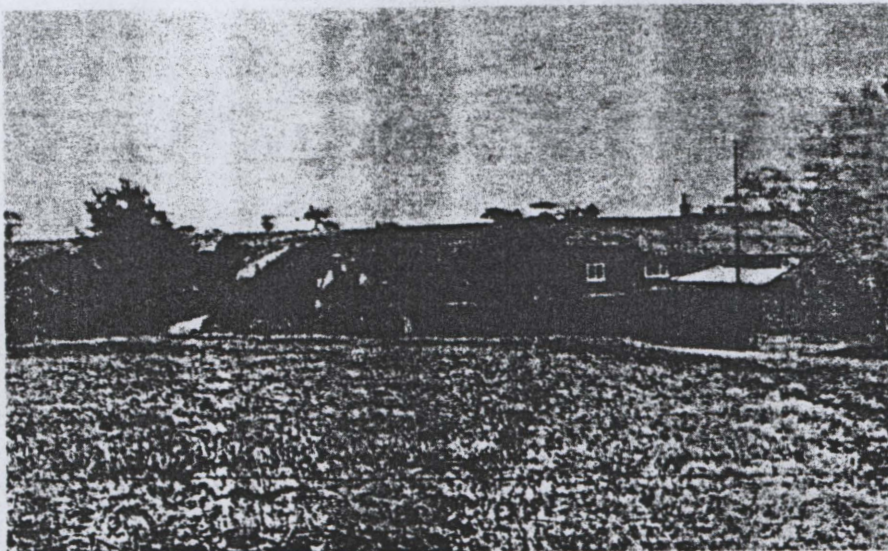
recorded that 15th century Margery Jourdain of Eye had the power of charming fairies and "fiends", thus minimising their power over men. Bury St. Edmunds also figures in such accounts.

Through the ages too there have been legends of mysterious young folk who, speaking no known language, have emerged suddenly from caves and clefts in rocks - for example the boy and girl with curious green skins who in the 11th century walked out of a cavern in the ground at Woolpit. In being taught some English by the kindly Sir Richard de Caine one described how they had been enticed away by the sound of church bells from a shadowy land of lakes and eternal twilight and had *wandered into our world by mistake*.

But the main centre for such visitations was Stowmarket, where fairies were once regularly seen in Tavern Street and elsewhere, one eye-witness account describing how "their dresses sparkled as if with spangles, they were moving around hand in hand in a ring. They seemed light and shadowy, not like solid bodies" (HISTORY OF STOWMARKET, Rev A. H. Hollingsworth).

These diminutive beings would also gather in people's houses, disappearing when the occupants returned from work, sparks of fire as bright as stars appearing under the feet of anyone who disturbed them. Sometimes however a close relationship would develop between them and humans.

Other fairies are malevolent. There is a windswept farm near my rural Essex home where to this day tractors grind to a shivering halt, crops wither, and "gnomes" were until recently seen *in broad daylight*. One one visit during the sixties my watch unaccountably stopped and a well-known medium in my party was sized with nausea, describing a "throbbing in the air like beating wings". During a later expedition a mysterious road accident was avoided by inches. In 1985 too, alone in the area, I was nearly thrown



The haunted field in rural Essex where farm machinery breaks down and gnome-like figures have been observed (photo by the author)

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off my bicycle by a force unseen...

I have also twice interviewed Mr Keith Foster, tractor driver, who once in the presence of a BBC TV team, described a whitish hooded figure seen gliding over the fields. Another key witness on that occasion was Mr "Willie" Rolfe (now deceased), who lived in the vicinity during a long life, and spoke of two women cottagers who years ago would watch gnomes dancing on the kitchen table. And there was Bob Wallace, who had a smallholding on the site, and swore that "little men" would frequently mock and watch him at work.

The manager of the farmstead I have known since he was a boy. He tells me that this territory was reclaimed from the river some forty years ago, and that the land is believed to have occupied the site of a Roman settlement. He spoke too of inexplicable mishaps with farm machinery, of vanishing tools and equipment, and a lingering impression of shadows and enigmatic voices heard at dusk.

Many similar cases have come to my notice. Just after World War I, two girls took a series of pictures of nature spirits in an enchanted glen at Cottingley, Yorkshire, experts examining the pictures declaring that they would not have been faked. During 1969 a member of the Torbay Spiritualist Centre wrote to say that his party had encountered "elves dressed in green" during a tour of the much-haunted Berry Pomeroy site near Totnes, Devon, one sketching the scene on the spot. Fairies have also been located in the Virginia Water, Surrey area.

There is the account too of two ladies who, touring Ireland, once heard the strident beat of a march played upon stringed instruments, read-pipes and cymbals, together with voices and the clash of arms from the invisible marching throng. And during a BBC broadcast in December 1969 a lady from North Uist spoke of her childhood in the Hebrides where belief in fairies was

commonplace. There have been reported sightings also from Benbecula, the Orkneys and elsewhere.

What however *are* fairies? Weird, capricious little beings living in hills or a subterranean realm of feasting and dancing, say the legends. Denizens of a near-world peopled by the human dead and nature-spirits alike, some scholars believe. Hallucination or a fanciful throwback to Druidic superstition, scoff the cynics. Take your pick...

There are many dedicated workers in this field. Mr F M Maxwell of the Theosophical Publishing House speculates on a "Devic" kingdom, wherein reside beings whose sound and light waves can sometimes be felt by sensitive persons through a "magnetic field upon which the physical atoms coagulate". The late Rosalind Heywood agreed with me that there is something we *call* fairies, and spoke of a form of supernatural singing she has heard when alone with nature (I have had similar experiences).

And there is Mr Gordon Creighton, MA, FRAS, FBIS, an expert on UFOs, who has collected accounts of nature-spirits during his travels throughout the world, and tells me he has developed subtle methods of registering their presence. It has even

been suggested that we are being closely observed by visiting extra-terrestrials, and their goblinous appearance - diminutive helmeted figures with the seeming ability to appear and disappear at will - has been emphasised...

Many people of course dismiss all such experiences as freaks of the atmosphere or archetypal memories of pre-Christian magic. They point out too that, in seeking the evanescent, the eyes frequently see what they *want* to see, finding their own points of reference and fumbling from one interpretation to another.

What however if these ephemeral beings move in a higher *octave* of light and sound than that which our eyes and ears register? Of the known spectrum, only a

fraction is visible to us, and a great number of dimly perceived worlds may co-exist at the same time. Gypsies for example are deeply aware of elemental beings in their midst, and to aboriginal races the world has long been a living pageant of semi-invisible spirits and inscrutable events.

Evasive, secretive, part of a sister stream of evolution behind nature, fairies would appear to be a peculiar independent company, with a superhuman power to injure or assist.

And in desolated solitudes, far from the corrupting hand of man, they wander in the twilight of eternity, using our world for their own arcane purposes, and manifesting to us only under very special conditions! □



*Wilma To Jellings*

*Dancing gnomes seen at the Berry Pomeroy site, Totnes 14/8/69. Described by Mr L J Hazel, Torbay Spiritualist Centre, and drawn by Mrs Wilma Jellings, psychic artist. These beings were dressed in green and red, with flat, beret-type hats. One waved to Mr Hazel's party on leaving the area.*

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