

# Magic mushrooms and Little People

By Ronald Faux

The Little People of Irish folklore may have sprung not from myth but from the hallucinatory effects of the so-called "magic mushroom" *psilocybe semilanceata*, consumed two centuries ago by peasants in crude hot houses.

That unromantic notion, ranking the fey spirits of Ireland with pink elephants and unidentified flying objects, comes in the spring issue of *Archaeology Ireland* in an article entitled "Sweathouses: Puzzling and Disappearing".

Mr Anthony Weir, specialist in early Ireland and its history, laments that the stone-built sweathouses found in Co Leitrim have become endangered buildings because they are unprotected in the republic.

Only two are preserved as amenities in Northern Ireland.

According to Weir they were used as primitive saunas by the peasantry

throughout Ireland and may have been connected with the consumption of the "magic mushrooms".

Soon after Boswell and Johnson strode through the Scottish Highlands and were divided in their view of what they found, a Frenchman, M Latocnaye, walked across Ireland and recorded the first description of a sweathouse in Co Donegal.

It was a building with a social purpose, heated like an oven and used as a cure for rheumatic pains and other diseases. "They heat it with turf in the way such a construction would be heated for the purpose of baking bread", M Latocnaye wrote.

When it was hot, four or five men or women, entirely naked, crept in through a little opening which was immediately closed with a piece of wood covered with dung. They remained sealed in for four or five hours. One theory suggested that

the sweathouses were a legacy of the Vikings although that likelihood had been rather discounted by the absence of sweathouses in the western isles of Scotland, where the Norse influence was particularly strong.

Certainly, sweating ceremonies were known to have been held in Siberia in traditional circular tents where the Fly Agaric mushroom was also consumed. Mr Weir points out that Irish sweat houses were most popular in autumn when the "magic mushrooms" were abundant.

Hence the notion that the Little People of Irish folklore could be descended from the mists of hallucination rather than time.

Mr Weir said that even young Irishmen he had talked to who had taken the magic mushrooms afterwards believed they could see fairies.

Times. 23 MAR 89