

## **The Cottingley fae ©**

There's all sorts of faery festivals around at present in the UK – the one in Alfriston is a regular fixture and others include those in the New Forest, in Cornwall and at Faeryology. But what is it about the fae that catches our attention – is it their glamour/ enchantment? Or do we see a link with previous beliefs that cannot be wholly rationalised away?

Even the famous hoaxes, like the Cottingley Faeries in 1917, took hold of the public imagination, until revealed as a photographic fraud in the 1970s. And this was after camera experts had declared the images as genuine. Even now, some still believe these fae to be genuine and, indeed, there's a Cottingley Faery Festival too. This report looks at the Cottingley fae in a little more detail later on.

## **Sylphs and air elementals**

Let's start, though, with some type of definition of what is meant by the word, *fae*. Often, the generic term, *sylph or sylphid*, has been used to describe all types of air elementals, eg:

- Angels.
- Air sprites.
- Air spirits.
- Archangels.
- Faeries, including air or flower faeries.
- Nymphs.

Sylphs were named by Paracelsus as the class of spirits that were linked with the air element. Sylphs are air spirits that live on mountain-tops and the leader of the sylphs was Queen Paralda. They can appear as beautiful quasi-humans with wings in this world, are formed of air, live in the air and have unusual power over the air, particularly the wind and the clouds.

In the 1500s, sylphs were portrayed as something between a spirit and a creature – invisible to humans, but larger than us too. By the 1700s, sylphs were painted as the Tinkerbell image – smaller, flying creatures with gentle wings. Paracelsus described them in a little more detail in his *Liber de Nymphis* and used classical folklore to depict them. The air is the element for sylphs – so, they drown in water, burn up in fire and can become trapped in the earth. They are also mortal and can die from the same causes as humans, ie illness or injury.

For the followers of Paracelsus, the idea of air elementals became ever more defined – and linked with what we might recognise as the fae. Here are some extensions to sylph-lore since Paracelsus.

1. Sylphs can change their shapes.
2. They are the flying angelic beings, made out of air itself.
3. In their truest form, they are tall, humanoid beings with huge wings, more than double the length of their bodies, flying and swooping in the sky like eagles.
4. Sylphs can make patterns in the clouds with their wings.
5. They are concerned about pollution/ the health of the skies.
6. Some claim that sylphs can clear away contrails from jets and can also affect the weather, because of their large wings.
7. Sylphs remain invisible to us, but one may see them by strong gusts of wind or intricate patterns in the clouds.
8. You may feel the presence of a sylph as a soothing, peaceful breeze that seems to speak directly to you, particularly if you are interested in nature, clouds or the environment.

## **Sylphs, Tinkerbell and the Theosophists**

In the late 1800s, the concepts of Paracelsus started to become more popular in the Theosophist movement, which believed in the existence of other metaphysical dimensions in which beings existed who cared about our natural world. A major philosopher here was an Austrian, Rudolf Steiner, who set out his beliefs in a series of lectures between 1908-24.

Such beliefs included the existence of elemental beings and how humans could contact or communicate with them. A typical example for Steiner was the use of clairvoyance or altered consciousness, ie "an ability to perceive a non-material reality existing alongside, but in constant synergy with, the material world," (*Perception of the Elemental World*, 1913).

The approach of theosophy, under the leadership of **Madame Blavatsky**, regarded faeries as a vital part of the natural world. In fact, many theosophy books or articles are full of faery references, eg the writer, Walter Evans-Wentz, produced a key work in 1911, *Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*.

In 1926, the **Fairy Investigation Society** was founded with a clear theosophist agenda. Theosophy classified the existence of faeries and specified how faeries helped in the natural world. To a large extent, it was a theosophist principle that underpinned how Walt Disney depicted faeries in his films. In this case, it's the timeline that's important, because the Disney films of *Snow White* in 1937 and *Fantasia* in 1940 were based on the faeries as part of the natural order. Faeries as autumn leaves and snowflakes in *Fantasia* all reflect a basic theosophist tenet at that time.

And this image continues to pervade our culture, right up to Walt Disney's *Peter Pan* in 1953 and beyond, with a whole media circus in place around the Tinkerbell character. The Fairy Investigation Society found that interest in faeries began to grow again in the 1960s and 1970s. Two reasons for this really – an increased interest in British/Irish folklore and the new consciousness of the hippy movement regarding ecology and spiritual topics.

### **The Cottingley case**

And so, we come to the Cottingley Faeries. Cottingley is a small area, near Shipley in West Yorkshire. In July 1917, Elsie Wright (aged 16) and her cousin, Frances Griffiths (aged 10), went out to the bottom of their garden in Cottingley – with Elsie's father's camera. The camera was a special one for that time: a Midg quarter-plate. Arthur Wright was a keen amateur photographer with his own darkroom.

Elsie's parents had listened to the girls' stories about playing with faeries with condescension. What the girls actually did was to make paper cut-outs of faeries, copied from a book, pinned these figures to plants and took turns in posing with the paper faeries, whilst the other girl took photos. The photos were developed by the girls in Arthur's darkroom and shown to their families as evidence that faeries were real. Arthur Wright didn't believe a word and refused to lend his camera to them again. Trouble was that Elsie's mother did believe the girls.

If we look closely at the photos now, it's obvious that they're fakes with 2-D staged figures. Even the girl's expressions are false, but in 1917, these considerations were less clear-cut, particularly at the end of the Great War, when spiritualism and magic were seen as a better route than the harsh realism of war.



In 1919, Mrs Wright showed the photos to a meeting of the local Theosophical Society (*see above*). And the members of that group immediately and unilaterally accepted the photographic images as real. One leading member (Edward Gardner) started a public campaign to show the Cottingley faeries as proof of the next cycle of evolution! Mr Gardner gave lectures, made copies of the images and passed them out to all and sundry.

Other converts to the faery photos included Margaret Macmillan and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who asked Gardner to get more photos. He visited the girls, who went down to the stream with Gardner's camera and came back with three more pictures. Edward Gardner then invited a psychic to Cottingley and his conclusion was that the place was infested with the fae!

After a while, public interest declined in the photos, especially in the light of the Second World War, apart from occasional enquiries. In 1983, the girls finally admitted that the photos were fakes, but some still want to believe in the truth of this encounter

### **Conclusion: the fae and magick**

OK then, so the Cottingley fae was a hoax, but it's true that many cultures believe in faery folk – beliefs that stretch back thousands of years. Just consider all the different names for the fae: elves, peri, pixies, spriggans, brownies, shining people, etc.

The Saxons believed in the fae, naming them *puca*, ie mischievous sprites that would steal your crops or upset your livestock. This is why we still come across a Pook Lane or Pook Hill. In Norse legends, there are many types of elves or *disir*. The Romans valued household spirits, eg the penates or lares. Ancient Greeks believed in fae-like beings, such as satyrs, nymphs or *sileni*.

Over the last decade or so, faery magick has been adopted by several pagan pathways, including Wicca, shamanism and a belief in faery lore that is quite separate. Faery lore and magick itself concerns those who believe they can communicate with the fae to achieve changes in nature or psychology. To some extent, this belief is not so far from that of Steiner.

For those on various Wiccan pathways, the faery element derives mainly from the writings of Kisma Stepanich in the 1990s. Kisma Stepanich is a writer, who concentrates on the Irish mythic tradition in establishing faery tarot, faery lore and faery traditions, based on Celtic legends. Or one could take the *Nanny Ogg* viewpoint.

"Elves are wonderful. They provoke wonder.  
Elves are marvellous. They cause marvels.  
Elves are fantastic. They create fantasies.  
Elves are glamorous. They project glamour.  
Elves are enchanting. They weave enchantment.  
Elves are terrific. They beget terror.  
The thing about words is that meanings can twist just like a snake, and if you want to find snakes look for them behind words that have changed their meaning.  
No one ever said elves are nice.  
Elves are bad" – *Lords and Ladies*, Terry Pratchett, 1992

So, perhaps it's not such a long step from sylphs or puca to more modern faery beliefs, festivals and all. For example, there have been several examples of due reverence paid to *faerie trees and houses*.

In April 2015, the BBC reported an outbreak of faery houses in Wayford Woods, near Crewkerne. It's a normal forest, but there were little doors and porches everywhere – this is not a joke, but the local council faery control squad tried to remove the doors, windows, etc and failed.

Similarly, in January 2014, in Iceland, the government re-routed a major road due to the fact that the original route disturbed an elf community. It was the belief of many Icelanders that elves lived among the rocks of the Alftanes peninsula, near Reykjavik, and that the road would disturb the elves. A public protest led to the road's new route.

Another road that was re-routed was the proposed upgrading of the National route from Limerick to Galway in 1999. It was delayed, re-routed and eventually opened nearly 10 years after it was supposed to have started, because there was a little faery tree in the way. The Clare County Council, as part of their contract, had a clause to protect the faery tree – "access is not permitted within a minimum 5m radius" - and a protective fence surrounds it.