

Sacred Geography: An Exploration of Some Welsh Fairy Places



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Overview

- Welsh Fairies.
- Psychical Environments.
- Landscape “Anomalies.”
- Deep Time.
- Hillforts.
- Caves and Mines (and Minds).
- Perception.
- Conclusion.

Welsh Fairies

- Revd. Elias Owen (1833-1899) provided a useful overview of different Welsh names for the fairies, including:
- “Y Tylwyth Teg” (the fair folk), “Beneath y Mama” (blessing of the mothers), “Ellyllon” (elves), “Dynion Bach Teg” (little fair men), “Coblynau” (goblins), and “Gwylliaid” (wild mountain fairies), amongst others (Owen, 1887).
- The earliest written record of the most common Welsh term for the fairies - ‘Tylwyth Teg’ - is from a poem dated to c. 1500, and was later included in one of the first Welsh-English dictionaries in 1547: “tuylwyth tec [=] Fairies” (Suggett, 2018, p. 138).
- The folklorist Robin Gwyndaf explains:

“Their habits and activities resemble those of men. It was once believed that the taller type were inclined to dishonesty. They stole butter and cheese and milked cows and goats. The smaller race, which figure most prominently in Welsh tradition, on the other hand, were beautiful and gentle folk. They were playful, fond of music and dance, and kind to mortals. Reports of their actual size vary, but generally they were held to be the size of a six-year-old child [...].” (Gwyndaf, 1997, p. 160).
- I will also include Giants in the discussion.



The Environment

- Evans-Wentz in his book *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911):

“As a preliminary to our study it is important [...] to give some attention to the influences and purely natural environment under which the Fairy-Faith has grown up [...]”
- “[...] though from the first our interpretation of Environment is fundamentally psychical” (Evans-Wentz, 1990, p. 1).
- The landscape is fundamental in shaping folkloric traditions, beliefs and experiences.
- “By standing at an anciently venerated natural place or monument, one stands within the vestiges of a former way of seeing the physical world, from an epistemology other than the current one. Such a different cognitive framework can impose itself spontaneously on the modern mind in the appropriate circumstances” (Devereux, 2013, p. 60).



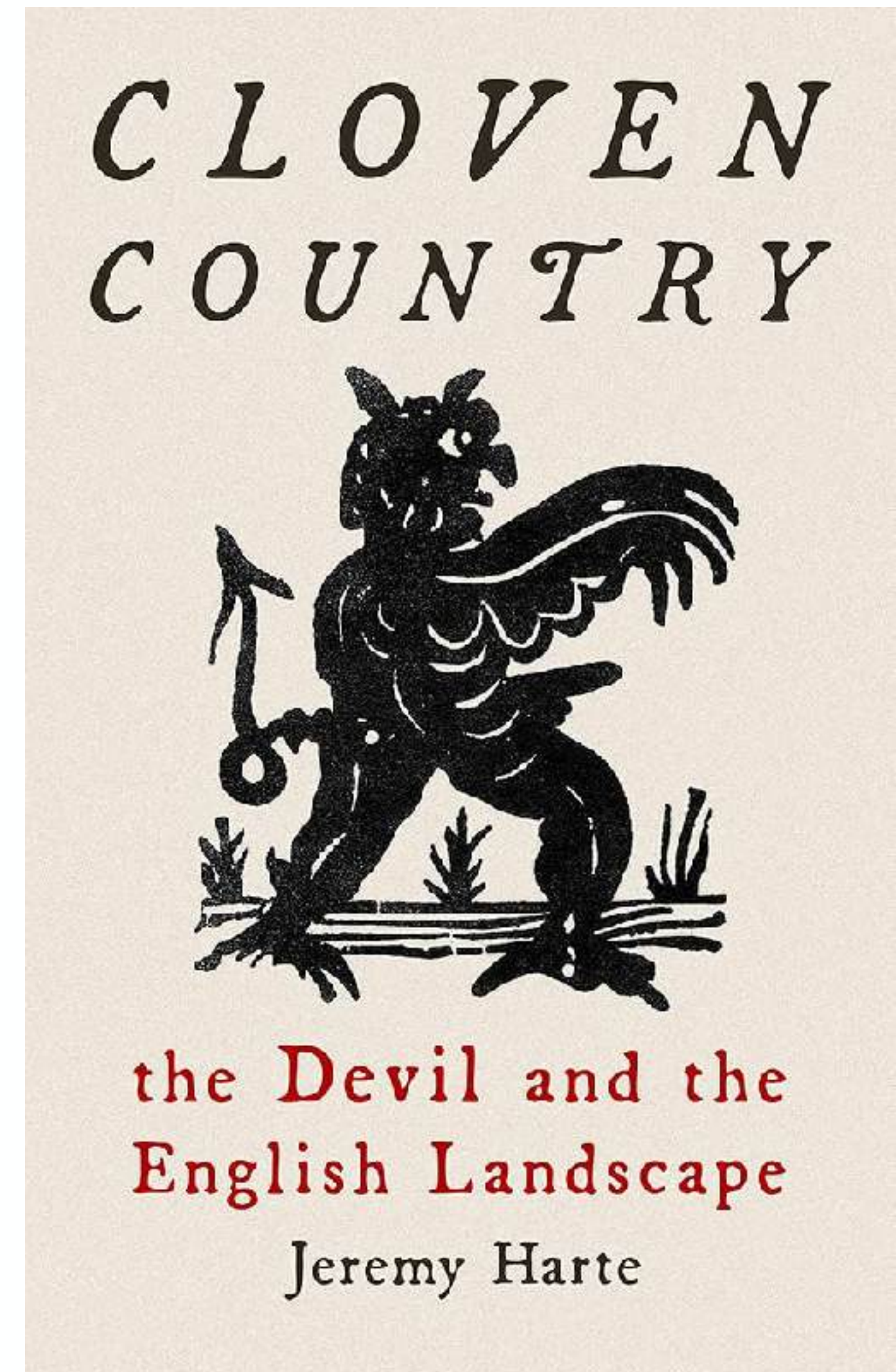
Landscape "Anomalies"

Landscape "Anomalies"

- Jeremy Harte:

“Mighty works have been attributed to the Devil - great rifts in the landscape and wonderful feats of road-building - but his industry always end in failure. Outwitted by clever mortals he leaves a half-finished monument. Sometimes his plans are purely destructive and he sets out to drop a small hill on a town [...]” (2023, p. 11).

- “[...] there was a vivid canon of Devil stories, but some of them had first been told about giants, and others were stolen from the fairies” (p. 7).
- Stories become narrative explanations for landscape anomalies.



**Moel Dimoel,
Powys**





The giant left his mark
on the other mountain.



**Llyn Cwm Llwch,
Powys**

Llyn Cwm Llŵch

- Hidden lake.
- “[...] every first of May a door was magically opened in a rock nearby. Behind that door there was a passage leading to a magic island in the middle of the lake, which was invisible for those who were on the lake shore. The fairies received all people and entertained them with music and delicious fruits. However, there was a condition: nobody could carry away any of the things belonging to that place, since the island was sacred. In one of those May visits, one person put a fairy flower in his pocket and took it to the land of the humans. When the fairies realised what had happened they felt very angry and the door was never opened again” (Fernandez, 2012, p. 14).
- Secret passageway/tunnels/invisible islands...





**Llyn Cwm Llŵch,
Powys**

**Craig-y-Dinas,
Neath**



Craig y Dinas

- Limestone outcrop.

- Wirt Sikes:

“Especially does a certain steep and rugged crag [in the Vale of Neath] called Craig y Ddinas, bear a distinctly awful reputation as a stronghold of the fairy tribe. Its caves and crevices have been their favourite haunt for many centuries, and upon this rock was held the court of the last fairies who have ever appeared in Wales.

Needless to say there are men still living who remember the visits of the fairies to Craig y Ddinas, although they aver the little folk are no longer seen there. It is a common remark that the Methodists drove them away, indeed there are numberless stories which show the fairies to have been animated, when they were still numerous in Wales, by a cordial antipathy for all dissenting preachers” (Sikes, 1880 [2020]).



Deep Time

Deep Time

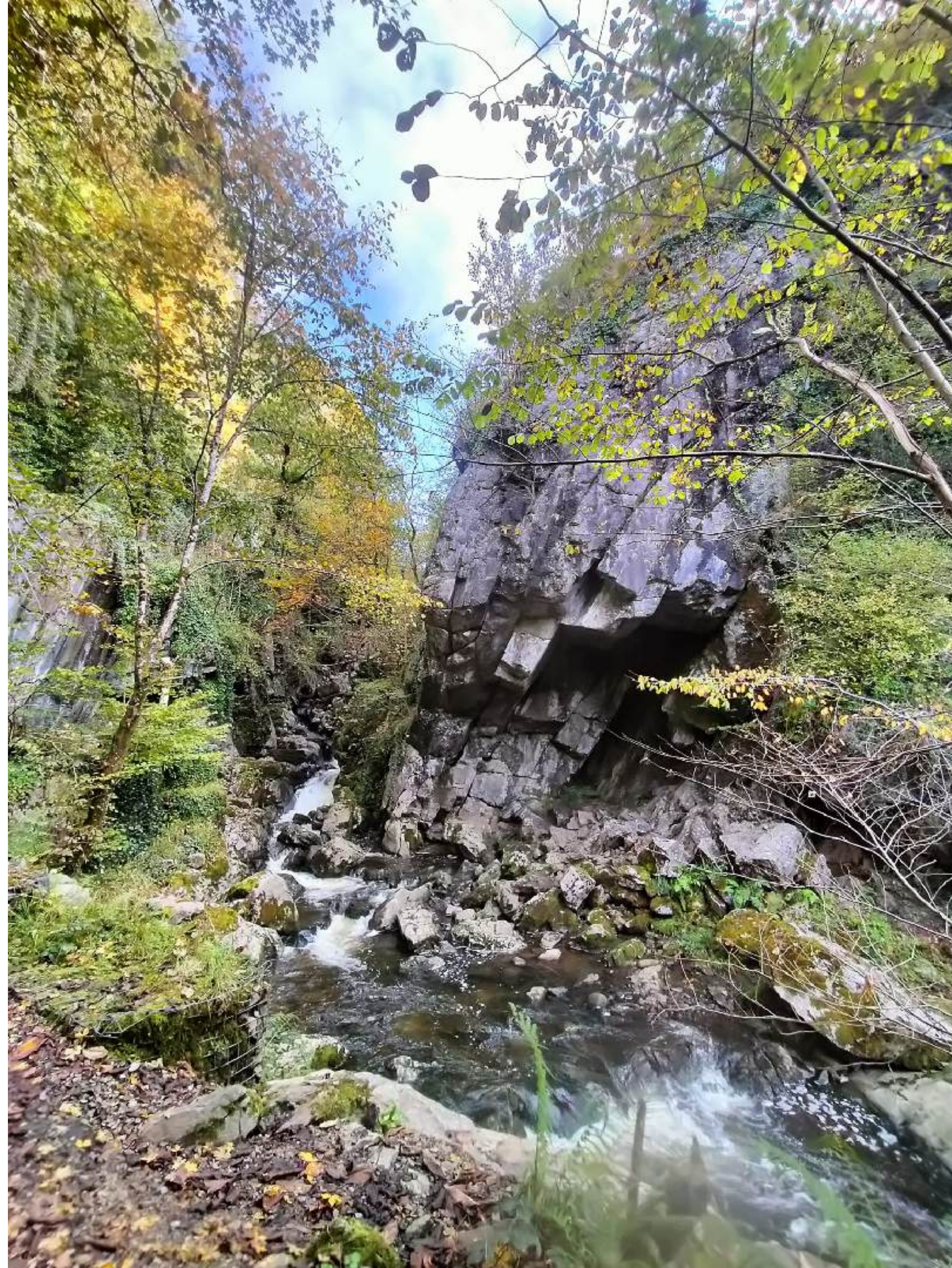
- Geology and folklore:

“The following have all been suggested explanations for fossil remains: Devil’s footprints, bones, toenails, fingers, thumbs, buttons, money and ninepins; Hobgoblin’s claws; Fairy’s fingers, heads, faces, hearts, beads, causeways, saltcellars, bottles, weights, money and loaves; elf arrows; witches’ beads and tongues. Twinned staurolite crystals have been called Fairy crosses” (Duffin & Davidson, 2011).

- Geological processes may also be a ‘source of sacredness.’
- The anthropologist Holly Walters (2020) has documented ‘the veneration of sacred fossil ammonites, called Shaligrams’ in Nepal.
- Their veneration ‘has been an integral part of ritual practice throughout South Asia.’
- ‘Viewed primarily as natural manifestations of the Hindu god Vishnu, Shaligrams are called svarupa (“natural forms”) and are therefore inherently sacred. The meaning of “natural”, then, is often locally articulated as something whose formation lies distinctly outside of human agency (meaning, for example, through the will of the gods or with the landscape). Shaligrams are natural in that they are not human-made and ultimately demonstrate their own agency. For this reason, they do not require any rites of consecration or invocation...’ (Walters, 2020).



**Craig-y-Dinas,
Neath**





**Barclodiad y Cawr,
Llanrhaeadr.**

**Allt-Tair-Ffynon/
The Devil's Ribs,
Powys**



Hillforts

Craig Rhiwarth

- Robert Richards:

“[Craig Rhiwarth] is the earliest haunt of fairies with which I was privileged to be intimately acquainted. The rings with which the southern slopes of the hill are more or less covered mark the exits from which the fairies emerged when twilight gathered, or mist descended, on the hill, and into which they disappeared again with the emergence of the full daylight” (Richards, 1938, p. 196).





**Craig Rhiwarth,
Powys**



**Llanymynech Hill,
Powys**





**Dinas Bran,
Sir Ddinbych**

Cawr Rhuddwyn

- In Llansilin...
- At the top of this hill is a fort known as Caer Rhuddwyn (Rhuddwyn's Fort), which contains a large stone cairn known as Bedd y Cawr (the giant's grave).
- In a great 1934 article, local archaeologist Robert Richards describes a notice written by a Mr. William Maurice or Llansilin in 1678, who reported:
- “An unheard of morrice [sic] dance is to be celebrated on the grave mound of Rhuddwyn Cawr Mawr a Kymerian Gian, of sixty feet in length, and nine in height above the ground by Marsli Hen, aged 140” (Richards, 1934, p. 170).



**Craig-y-Dinas,
Neath**



Caves and Mines

**Craig-y-Dinas,
Neath**



Tunnels

- Craig y Dinas:
- “The Welshman at once began to dig up the roots of the hazel, and after digging for some time the men discovered a very broad and flat stone. Underneath the stone there was a flight of broken steps, where the men descended, and soon reached a long corridor, from the roof of which a huge bell was suspended. The stranger warned the drover never to touch the bell, for the consequences would be dreadful” (Trevelyan, 1909, pp. 135-136).



**Craig Rhiwarth,
Powys**



**Craig Rhiwarth,
Powys**





**Craig Rhiwarth,
Powys**

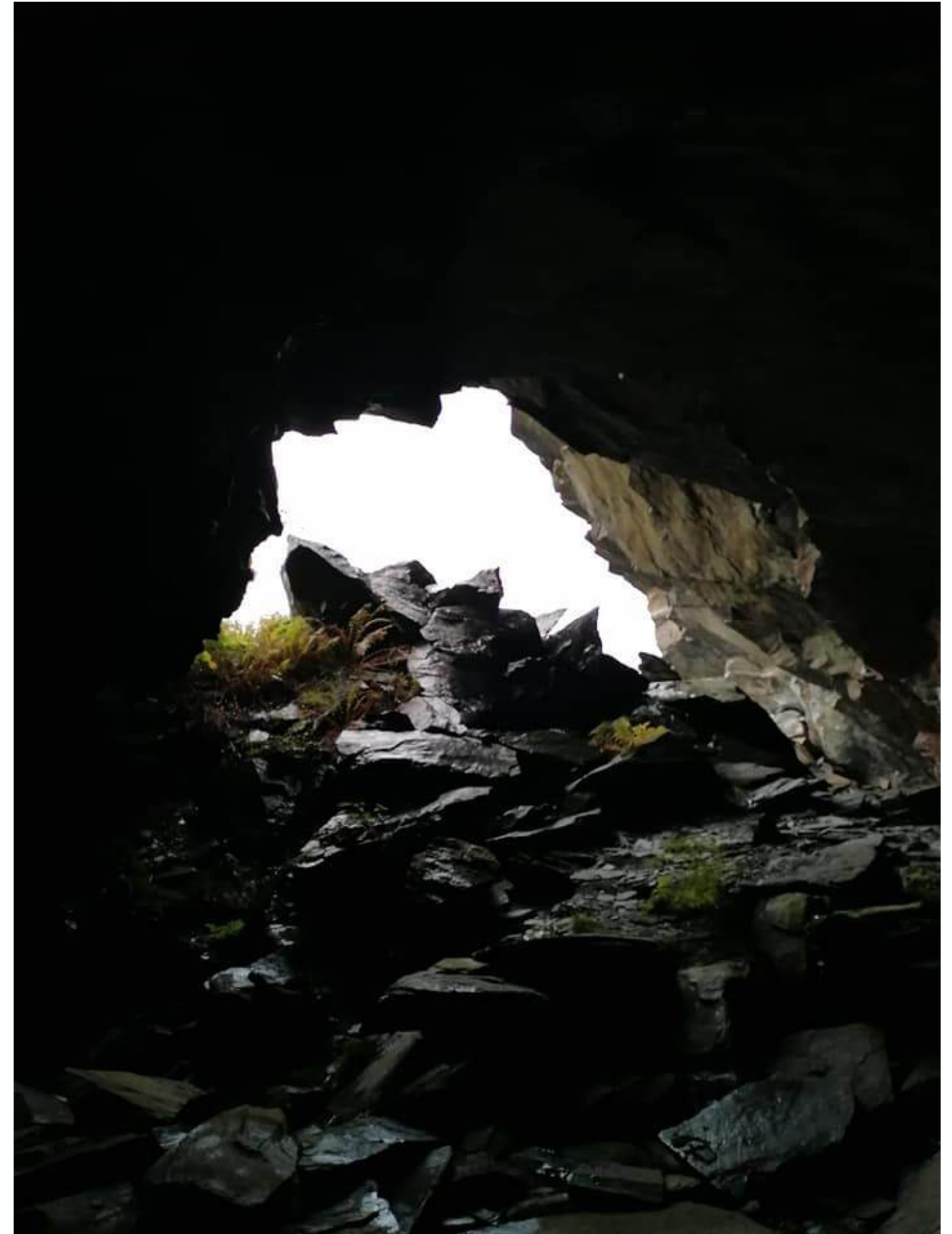
Craig Rhiwarth

- From John Rhys' *Celtic Folklore* (1901):

“Take for instance a cave in the part of Rhiwarth rock nearest to Cwm [G]lanhafan, in the neighbourhood of Llangynog in Montgomeryshire. Into that, according to Cyndelw in *The Brython* for 1860, p. 57, some men penetrated as far as the pound of candles lasted, with which they had provided themselves; but it appears to be tenanted by a hag who is always busily washing clothes in a brass pan” (Rhys, 1901, p. 456).

- “A lady all dressed in white was for many years the unhappy denizen of one of the disused quarries in the Rhiwarth Valley” (Richards, 1934, p. 168).
- Ladi wen:

“There are certain motifs in ghost-lore which are so common as to become stereotypical in some respects. The *Ladi Wen* (white lady) is one such example” (Badder & Norman, 2023, p. 133).



Llanymynech Hill

- Revd. William Bingley reports:

“The cavern in Llanymynech hill, not far from Oswestry, has been long noted as the residence of a clan of fairies, to whom the neighbouring villages attribute many surprising and mischievous pranks. Whilst they have stopped to listen at the mouth of the cave, the people state that they have sometimes even heard the little elves in conversation, but this was always in such low whispers, that the words which were reverberated along the sides and roof of the cavern could not be distinguished. The stream that runs across a distant part of this cavern is celebrated as the place where the fairy washerwomen and labourers have been heard frequently at work” (Bingley, 1839, pp. 322-323).

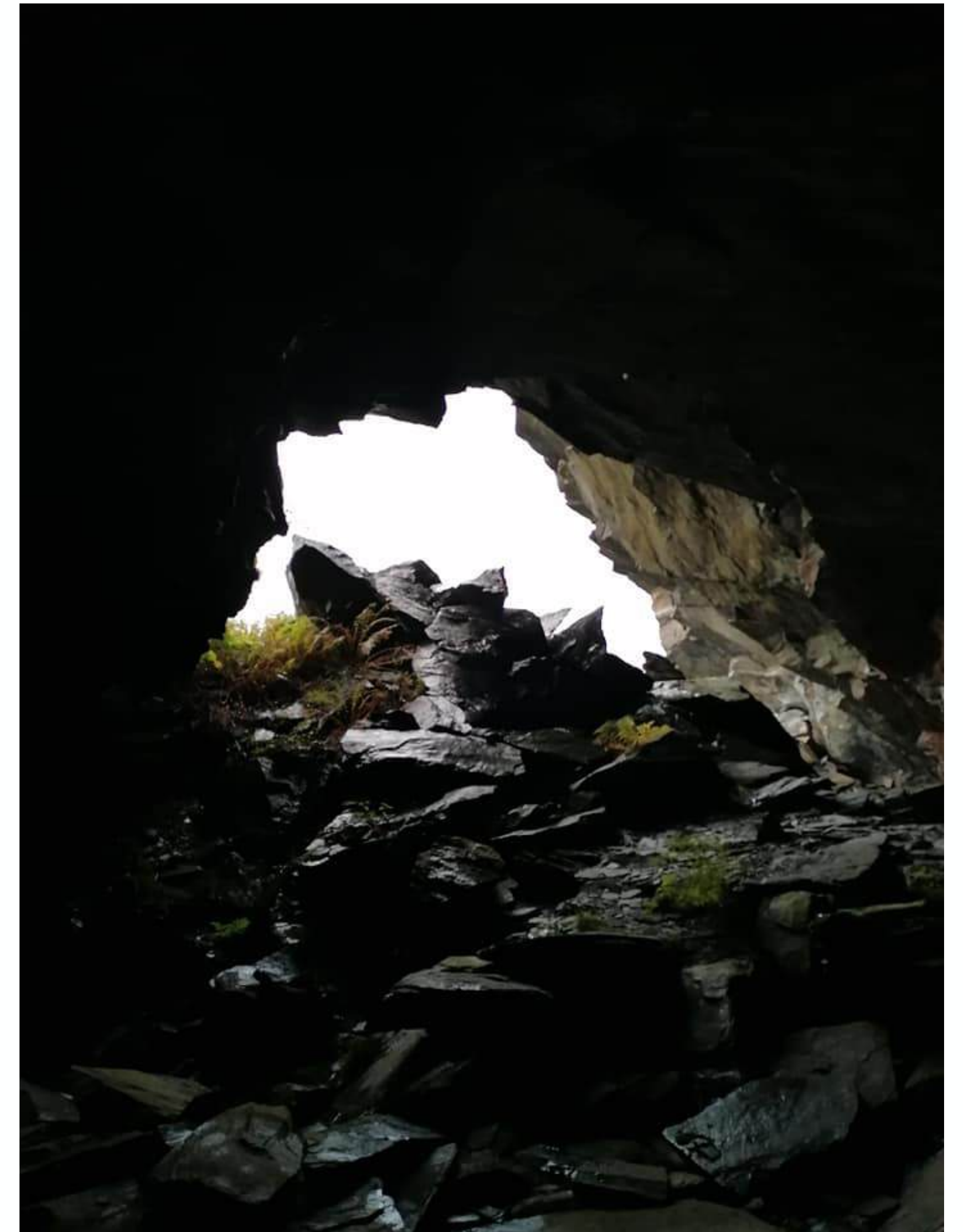
- Tunnels leading from beneath the hill:

“Tradition says this labyrinth communicated, by subterranean paths, with Carreghova Castle; and some persons aver that they have gone into it so far as to hear the rivers Fyrnwy and Tanat rolling over their heads, and that it leads down to Fairy-land” (Llwyd, 1832, p. 295).



Caves and Perception

- David Lewis-Williams:
- “During the Upper Palaeolithic, we argue, the lines of caves of western Europe were regarded as topographical equivalents of the psychic experience of the vortex and a nether world [...]”
- “The caves were the entrails of the underworld, and their surfaces - walls, ceilings, floors - were but a thin membrane between those who ventured in and the beings and spirit-animals of the underworld [...]”
- “[...] a context created by interaction between universal neuropsychological experiences and topographically situated caves” (Lewis-Williams & Clotte, 1998, p. 16).
- Fairy traditions associated with caves and tunnels appear to be continuations of a much more ancient association.



Perception

FAIRIES

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from the farmhouse went down the chimney of the other's dwelling. Rhys (CF 200) quotes an interesting Conway Vale informant who stated that Fairies lived seven years on earth, seven in the air and seven under ground.

According to other tales, current in the old Goidelic territory of Dyved, Fairies, known as *Plant Rhys Ddwfn*, 'the children of Rhys Ddwfn,' lived in islands out at sea. *Rhys Ddwfn* may mean 'Rhys the Deep,' 'Rhys the wise,' even possibly 'Rhys of the Deep.' The antiquity of the term is doubtful, unless it happen to conceal some Goidelic form, as it well may. One account states that Rhys Ddwfn was the chief of a country lying between Cemmes in Pembroke and Aberdaron in Caernarvonshire, which, by means of certain herbs growing there, was kept invisible, except from a small patch of ground at Cemmes. Rhys Ddwfn had taught his children to honour their parents and ancestors and to be faithful to each other, so that no traitor could live on their soil (Br. I 130). Excluding the account of the existence of invisible land in the position indicated and of trading between its inhabitants and the mainland, this composition looks like a modern development of the suggestion contained in the epithet *dwfn* as applied in modern Welsh to a person who is both reflective and reticent.

**Pen Cemaes,
Sir Benfro**



Simulacra

- “A *simulacrum* is the chance likeness to a form meaningful to the perceiver seen in the configurations of clouds, the coals of a fire, the bark of a tree, or other surface” (Devereux, 2013, p. 54).
- “Today many people may treat observations of simulacra, if noticed at all, as inconsequential curiosities. However, seeing a likeness in, say, a topographical feature could be culturally reinforced in the societies of many ancient and traditional peoples, enabling a society to see its mythology emblazoned on its home territory, to see its deities, culture heroes, or some religious, symbolic icon in the very lay of the land —an aspect of what Lévy- Bruhl (1935/1983) called “participation mystique.” It mythologized a countryside, giving it meaning. The land became cognized” (ibid.).





**Craig-y-Dinas,
Neath**



Elsie with a winged gnome — Frances Griffiths
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cottingley_Fairies#/media/File:CottingleyFairies2.jpg

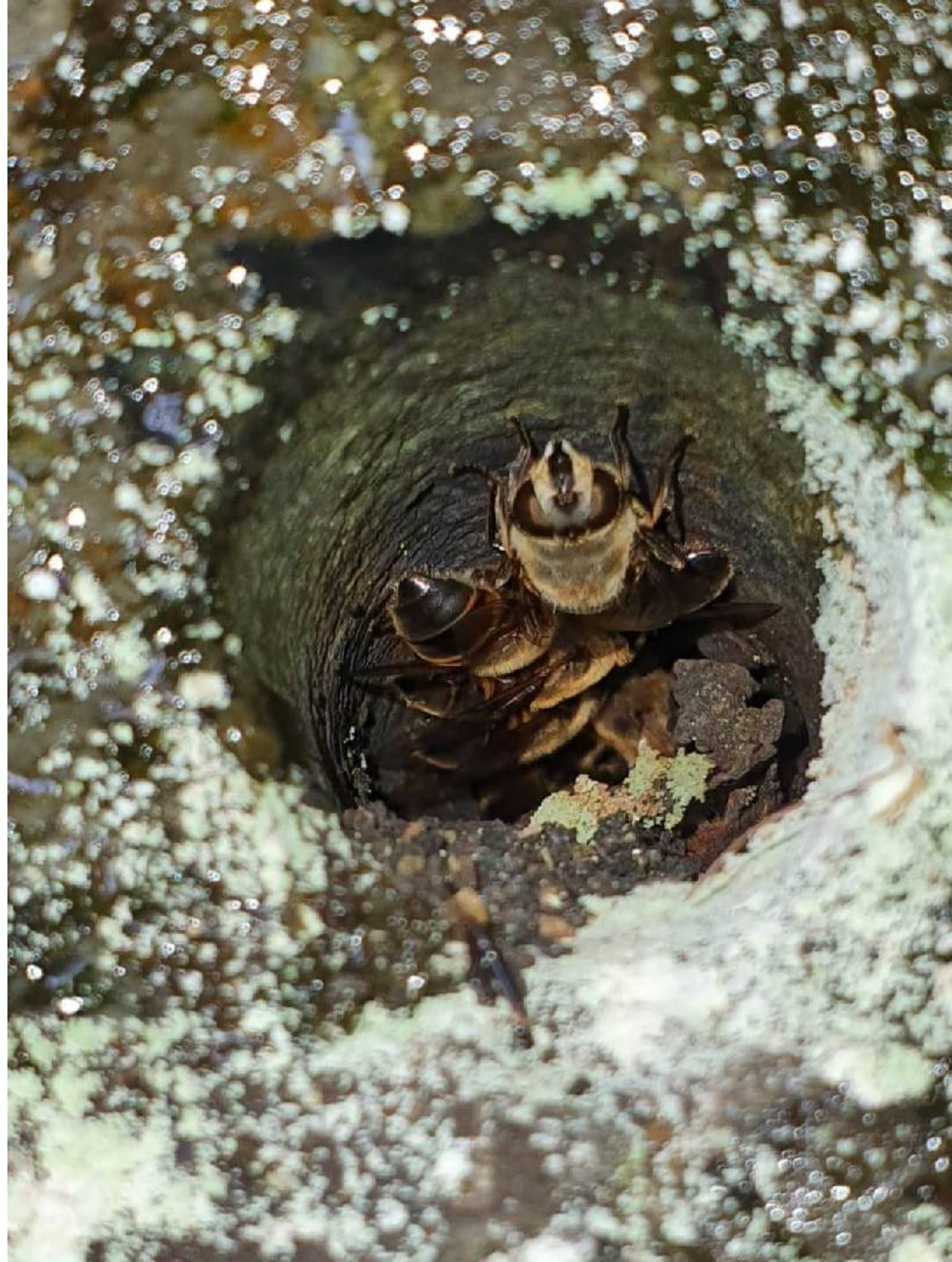


Frances and the Leaping Fairy — Elsie Wright <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:CottingleyFairies3.jpg#/media/File:CottingleyFairies3.jpg>

Messengers of the Fairies

- "The bees of fifty years ago, like the fairies, have been banished from Wales, and I sometimes feel that, with their departure, there has been some loss both of hope and of sweetness in life. When you begin to talk about fairies, you must begin with the bees, for they are the messengers of the fairies, and will lead you to them and their habitats" (Ellis, 1929, p. 298).
- "Visits to Craig Rhiwarth on misty autumn days were to be avoided at all costs. Anyone who ventured to climb to the top on such a day could not help seeing the fairies" (Richards, 1934, pp. 168-169).





**Craig Rhiwarth,
Powys**

"On behalf of the Royal Entomology Society, I'm responding to your recent photographic query. How remarkable! These are hoverflies (Family Syrphidae) and from the tribe Eristalini. The general dark brown colour and black face stripe (especially) leaves the impression that they are *Eristalis tenax* although there are other characters I cannot see that would confirm this. This is a hive-bee mimic, so closely sharing honey bee morphology that many people cannot distinguish one from the other, especially when in flight. They are harmless, and as far as we know, do no harm to hives. I've seen them freely entering a tree-rot-hole containing a bee nest without any response from the worker bees - probably they were feeding on the honey in the base of the rot-hole. You probably observed the over-wintering location chosen by this group. A record at this altitude and in such a tight hole must surely be worth a short note in Entomologist's Monthly Magazine or Entomologist's Gazette."

IDENTIFICATION

***Eristalis tenax* (Drone-fly) (10-13 mm)**

An interesting observation by Llywelyn Owen was recorded on November 17 at a disused slate quarry in Llangynog, Powys. Five drone-flies, *Eristalis tenax* (Syrphidae), had clustered in a dynamite borehole about 355 m above sea level (Fig. 7). This honey bee-mimicking drone-fly is a familiar species that can be seen throughout the year as mated adult females overwinter in buildings, under eaves of roofs, in crevices in trees and walls. They may venture out during winter in clement conditions. This observation is unique in two ways – firstly, communal clustering in a rather limited space (the borehole was roughly 2.5 cm in diameter) and secondly, the altitude is interesting as winter temperatures are low and in January average a low of 0°C and high of 5°C (weatherspark.com).



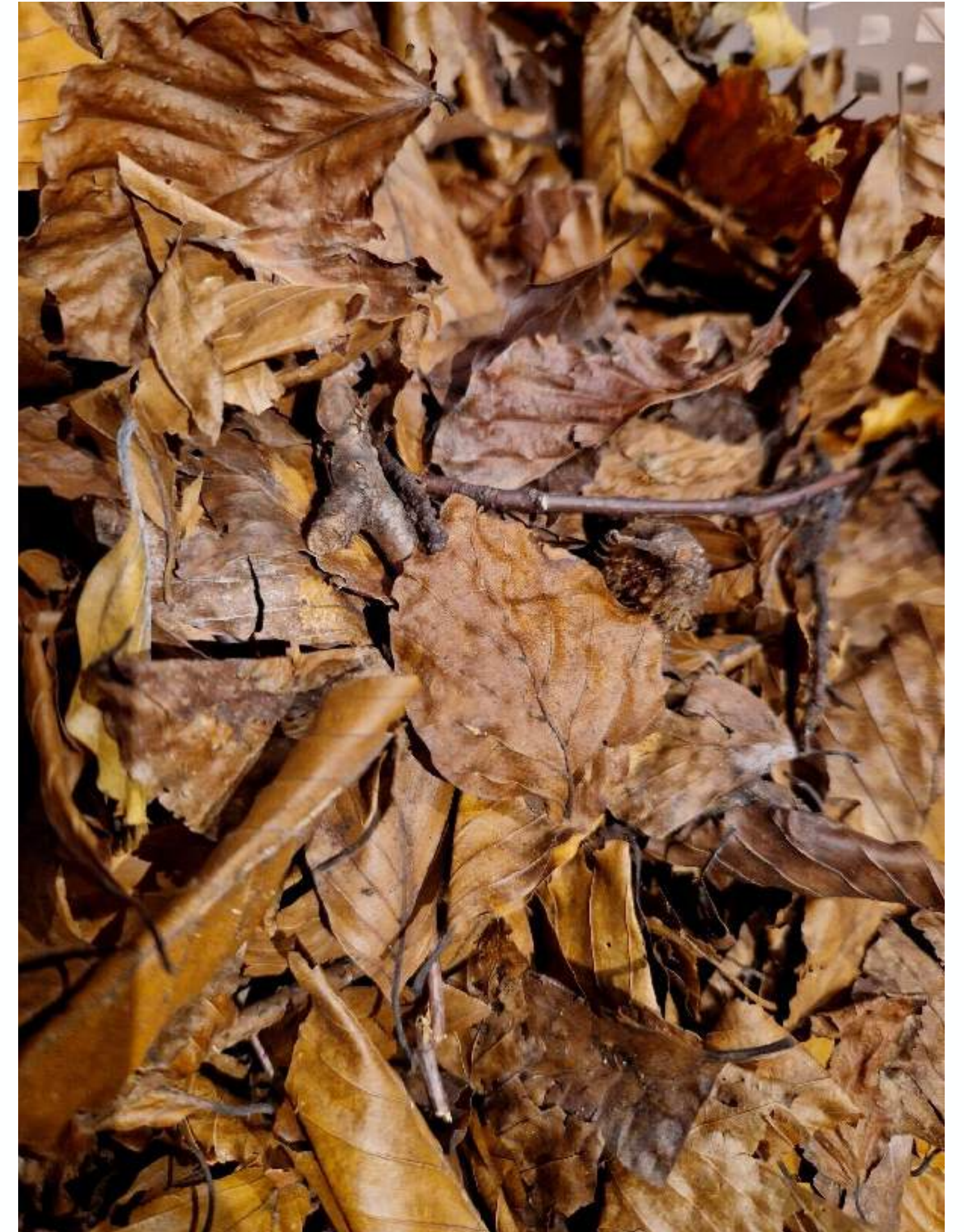
Fig. 7. *Eristalis tenax*.

Photo by Llywelyn Owen

Fairy Glamour

- Simon Young:

“Typical faery deployments of glamour are to make people believe that they are in grand homes or halls, that they’ve been offered delicate and delicious food or that they have been given faery gold. What they will have really experienced is, respectively, a cave, some dung or some dried leaves [...] glamour is more than a superficial disguise but can alter the very fabric of an item so that it is no longer its natural self but takes on all the characteristics of whatever substance or object the faeries wish it to resemble” (Young, 2022).



Both-And

- Not ‘either-or.’
- In *The Secret Life of Puppets*, Victoria Nelson suggests that modern Western societies have - to a large extent - lost an ancient way of perceiving the world and the objects that make it up.
- “Most Westerners today, looking at a stone Krishna [...] or [...] a wooden Christ [...] find it virtually impossible to experience these human-made images as possessing both life and supernatural powers - as holy, a lost field of perception for us [...]”
- “To see them so violates one of the deepest taboos of our empirical-materialist belief system, namely, accepting a vision of the universe that includes both a level of nonmaterial reality and a direct connection to this other level through that which seems most profoundly to negate it: the “dead” inanimate matter of which sacred objects are made” (Nelson, 2002, p. 25).



Conclusion

- The land is layered with stories.
- Landscape anomalies/Deep Time - explanations.
- Hillforts and ancient monuments - fairies and the ancestors/the dead.
- Altered perceptions - caves, tunnels and hagstones.
- Simulacra - cognised landscapes.
- Both-And - Fairy Glamour.

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