

Arthur Rackham, "The Three Heads of the Well",
from F.A. Steel's *English Fairy Tales Retold* (1927).



‘A Fairy, or Else an Insect’: Traditions at Fairy Wells

Jeremy Harte

It is May Day and the girls make their way up the hillside, happy, graceful and young, all dressed in their best holiday linen, a flow of white against the green. Above, the fitful sun and scudding clouds of a Northumberland spring, scattered boulders on the grass, the weathered profile of Maiden Camp on the skyline. Ahead of them, the Fairy Well of Wooler nestles in a saddle of the hills. Each girl carries a pin tightly clasped in her right hand, and at the well she bends it and drops it in the water, silently, fervently, with eyes shut tight – hoping that the fairy of the well will hear her wish and hers alone, that the boy of her heart will have eyes for her only and not for any of those other maidens in white. Presumably the fairy fixed it somehow, for love and longing and marriage and motherhood were followed by the children growing up so fast, and then more love and longing, leaving the fairy well stacked up with pins: until a day came when these innocent customs of the elder time lost their charm, and somebody tidied all the litter away, so that now there is nothing for the antiquarian to see but a circle of rough stones around clear water.¹

At the Fairy Well of Schiehallion in Perthshire local girls would dress up, again in white, and bring garlands as May Day offerings for the fairies who granted wishes and cured illness.² At Frankby on the Wirral, children used to visit Fairy Well before taking bunches of flowers to a rock that they called Fair Maiden’s Hall; they left the flowers on top of the red sandstone outcrop and danced round it.³ On the hill of Brayton Barff, north of Pontefract, there was a rock-lined spring called Lady’s Well, a fairy well where local girls would look into its waters and see, or imagine they saw, the reflection of their destined young man. If the spring failed to play the part of an enchanted mirror, there was always the chance you’d dream about him when you got back home.⁴

Lady’s Well was the name on the map but the girls called it Lady Pin Well or Our Lady’s Pin Well because they began the magic by dropping a pin ‘to propitiate Our Lady or the fairies.’ Evidently there was still some confused notion in the West Riding that Our Lady was an invisible person whom it was prudent to honour; but in Derbyshire they had lost even that vestigial memory of the Catholic faith. Instead, children used to run off on Palm Sunday or Easter Monday to put new pins into springs which they called ‘lady wells’, because they’d been told these had a lady of the well who would not otherwise let them have clean water. ‘They had to do what the lady required. It was a fairy, or else an insect.’⁵

However hazy their spiritual ideas about fairy wells, young people had exact instructions for what should be done at them. They distributed halves of eggshells around the edge of

Fairy Well at the foot of Preesall Hill in Lancashire without knowing why – it was just one of those things you always did.⁶ There was an old tree nearby that was festooned with rags, as there was at the Fairy Well of Gilstead near Bingley, where visitors left a pin, and tied a bundle of old cloth (they called it a 'memaw') onto the trees that grew between the well and the fairies' hole.⁷ Fairy Well at Staining near Blackpool was a place for ritual healing. Sick people would walk through a cairn and then get a friend to sprinkle them with water from the well. They were always careful to leave something behind: a shell, a pin, a rusty nail, a rag or, best of all, three white stones which had been scorched by the Teanla fire that burnt on Halloween for the protection of the fields.⁸

Fairy fortune was not automatic; the success or failure of a wish was often something that had to be divined. You floated a pin on the waters of the Pixies Well at Fernworthy near Chagford, and got an answer about the future, presumably from the way that the pin finally sank, head-first or point-down.⁹ There was some business about pins and pixies at Roebuck Farm near Cothelstone, but nobody could remember what.¹⁰ At Carbis Bay you scrambled down the cliffs to the Fairy Well and stood, rather precariously, with your back to the well, then wished and threw a pin over your left shoulder – it had to be the left one. If it splashed into the water, your wish would be granted, but hard luck if it landed on the grassy bank.¹¹

Children in Lincolnshire took a more positive view, assuring each other that after a drink from the Fairy Well at Denton 'your first wish is sure to come true'. How did they know? Come to that, how did they know it was a fairy well at all? The spring had first come to notice in the 1780s when a teahouse was next to it as part of the pleasure grounds of Sir William Earl Welby. Trees were clipped back, the surroundings landscaped, and the original name of Sancaster Well improved into St Christopher's Well. In the 1840s the original shelter was replaced by a summerhouse and a grotto over the well, inscribed with a poem which included the words 'Here fairies dance and sport . . .'. By the 1920s the folly was close to collapse, but the fairies had found a place in local lore, outlasting the inscription that invoked them.¹²

The incantatory power of the stonemason was just as strong at the Fairy Well at the Black Craig, east of Inch Keith in Lanarkshire, where people travelled long distances so that they could descend some stone steps cut into the hillside and drink the healing waters. These flowed out from a masonry setting, their magic certified by the stone slab which surmounted the well and was engraved:

*If thy spirit is pure as this crystal spring
Stranger drink its water and fearlessly fling
The tiny cup in the bright fairy well
Its magic for thee has no fatal spell . . .*

These lines are first recorded in 1861 and if literary style is anything to go by, they were composed not long before.¹³ Evidently fairy traditions do not always well up spontaneously from folk consciousness: they can be made. On the seashore facing Ulverston, under the cliffs of Humphrey Head, a brackish spring was celebrated from at least 1674 as a remedy 'for stone, gout and cutaneous complaints'. Over a century after it first began to be visited, this was developed for visitors under the name of Holywell, and two caves in the rock were pointed out as the Fairy Church and Fairy Chapel. Nearby was another spring, into which those who sought health by drinking the waters of the Holy Well were advised to drop a pin, which they did with satisfactory results until 1804 when the local commons were enclosed and the Pin Well covered up.¹⁴

So did these traditions of drinking and offering pins at fairy wells all stem from poetical whimsy? The evidence is certainly pointing that way, but this is not the accepted wisdom of most books on the subject which, new or old, treat these little tokens as fragments from a well cult of the remotest antiquity, following a line of thought first advanced by that redoubtable Victorian, Edward Sidney Hartland, who published a paper on pin-wells and rag-bushes in 1893.¹⁵ After collating and comparing reports from Caernarvonshire to the Congo, he traces it all back to primitive magic, a theory which covers every rite – except where the people who actually performed things got them wrong.

That may sound a little too neat for comfort but surely, you feel, he was onto something when he talked about survivals; trivial as they seem, these crooked pins and scraps of cloth must hark back to something older and more primitive. People don't go around making ritual offerings in wild scenery just because the idea took their fancy. Or do they?

If you holiday on Dartmoor, or in the Lake District, or many other locations where families go out walking with backpacks and water bottles and a shared love of nature, you will eventually come across an old tree propped across the wayside, with coins sticking out of its wood. Hundreds of them, one for every passer-by who stopped, pulled out a bit of small change, and hammered it into the bark, or helped their children hammer it. Often, when asked, they say they do it for luck; sometimes they add that it's something to do with the fairies. And a comprehensive study carried out by Ceri Houlbrook traced this custom back to ... 2002. That's when the coin-tree tradition began in England.¹⁶

Could the fairy well be a modern development, like the coin-tree? I've found 34 springs in Britain with that name, and none of them appear in early documents. The first to be mentioned is Staining in 1837, followed by two others without recorded traditions, at Baguley in Cheshire (1837) and Sowerby in the West Riding (1839). About half the wells appear for the first time in the 19th century, with a peak in the 1850s and '60s; the rest are more recent. Many of them had been known by other names before the fairies took possession. Fairy Well in Staining appears on early maps as Wrong Well. At Bradford in Devon, Cadiho Well was the alternative name; at Heyhouses in Lancashire, Pewter Well; at

Laugharne in Carmarthenshire, the Kings Well. Piskies' Well in Pelynt had originally been St Nun's Well, and Fairy Well at Logie in Stirlingshire was a variant on the usual Highlandman's Well. The spring at Wooler was also known as the Wishing or Pin Well, while the old people said it should really be Maiden Well, after the adjoining camp. In Argyll, the Fairy Well south of Glengarrisdale had a quite different name in Gaelic, Tobar Leac nam Fiann — the 'Well of the Fian Flagstone'.

As this last example suggests, 'Fairy Well' is a distinctively English/ Scots name, one which had no native equivalent in the Celtic languages. Schiehallion is *Sìdh Chailleann*, the fairy mountain of the Caledonians, but when girls processed to the spring there, they named it Fairy Well. The three sites called Pixy/ Pisky Well are no exception to this trend, since the word 'pixy' is relatively modern, not used in any place-name before 1793. Not only do the Fairy Wells lack analogues in Gaelic, Welsh or Cornish, they also fail to match up with earlier English toponymy. There were at least 23 wells in England named after the spirit called *pūca* or puck, half of them recorded in the Middle Ages, and a further 11 named after the *byrs* or hobthrust, all but one medieval. None of these were refashioned as Fairy Well; in fact none of them seem to have any surviving traditions at all. The old map of fairy tradition and belief has been wiped clean and replaced by something entirely new.

This is embarrassing, because for decades we have been celebrating the heritage of story in Britain, a land haunted by traditions from the remote past: 'buried beneath the surface of everything we see are old, hidden meanings — older and often darker'.¹⁷ All very true, but only sometimes, and for some people. We as historians are able to look down from a privileged vantage point over the pastures and pathways of our little world, and make out those half-visible traces from the past that underlie the present. But for the people who actually trudge along the field-paths, there is no *longue durée*. They live in the present, and even their oldest folklore is often not as old as we would like it to be.

A folklorist of Hartland's generation, trained in the uncritical accumulation of evidence, could have said many fine things about the Fairy Well. It could be identified with the well of the daughter of the King of Colchester, with its three speaking heads, or the well at which Hereward's crone invoked her unseen demon, with the *pucan wylle* of the Old English charter for Bexhill (the most ancient supernatural name in England), or the eldritch well where the witch conjured the whirlwind on Arthur's Seat, with the Scottish forest well in which the enchanted naked maiden stood before Sir Desiré, or the sacred well of Coventina and her nymphs.¹⁸ All these, and many more, could have been woven into a single story but the end result would be fantasy, not folklore, because these references have been plundered from half a dozen different imaginative worlds, and folklore is the knowledge that people have in an actual here and now.

New traditions drive out old ones: our fairy landscape is not so much a palimpsest as an etch-a-sketch, shaken clear at intervals and drawn again on new lines. It so happens that the latest pattern is one of lovestruck teenagers dropping pins to catch the attention of

a kindly fairy, and I'm very sorry about this, because I too would have preferred something less Victorian and sentimental, more dark and strange; but that is how it is; and if folklore teaches us one thing, it is that we should not turn our noses up at the fairies before us, for fear of finding something worse.

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Jeremy Harte

Notes

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4. Robert Charles Hope, *The Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England* (London: Elliot Stock, 1893), 187-93.
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