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Why do so many people still believe in the Cottingley Fairies?

Frances Griffiths in one of their famous Cottingley Fairies photographs

One hundred years after the photographs were taken, why is one community still transfixed by the hoax? By David Barnett

At the bottom of Luke Horsman's garden, there are fairies. Or at least, there were, a century ago, when two young girls unwittingly created a modern tale that brought together two worlds; the relatively new one of photography and the ages-old sphere of folklore, entrancing a famous figure as Sherlock Holmes creator Arthur Conan Doyle.

Mr Horsman, 35, lives in Main Street, a narrow road of terraced houses, in the village of Cottingley in West Yorkshire, with his partner Ruth. He's an illustrator and is working on a graphic novel called, with perhaps a nod to the idyllic outlook from his end-of-terrace house, Edengate. But, despite the sometimes fantastical nature of his own work, he had no idea when he and Ruth purchased the property in November 2015 that he was buying a slice of the history of the famous Cottingley Fairies.

"It wasn't mentioned to us at all," says Mr Horsman, leading me to the kitchen, which overlooks the garden behind the house. "It was only when we moved in and

one of the neighbours said to us, 'Ah, you're the ones who've bought the fairy house' that we had any idea. I had no idea what they were talking about at first." Mr Horsman takes me through the garden, along slate paths to an arbour that perches on the edge of a brook that cascades down past the backs of the homes in Main Street. This is Cottingley Beck, a narrow stream that separates the row of gardens from a lush, thick dell, dappled in sunlight.

Famous setting: Luke Horsman at the bottom of his garden at the 'fairy house' in Cottingley, West Yorkshire

It is here, precisely here, where Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths crossed the stepping stones from this very garden to that very dell in July 1917, bearing Elsie's father's cherished camera, and came back with a series of photographs that would capture imaginations across the world.

Back then, the house in Main Street was occupied by Arthur and Polly Wright and their only daughter, Elsie. Arthur was an electrical engineer and keen amateur photographer, the proud owner of a Midg quarter-plate camera, an expensive piece of kit for the time. Also living with them, temporarily, were Polly's sister Annie Griffiths and her daughter Frances, who had made the dangerous wartime sea journey from South Africa.

By 1917, Elsie was 15 and Frances nine, but, despite the age gap, the girls became firm friends and played together in the dell, often coming home soaking wet and covered in mud.

It was Elsie who first started blaming fairies for their dishevelled appearance, and an amused Arthur indulged them with the loan of his precious camera to allow them to "prove" the Little Folk were real.

The girls duly obliged and returned the Midg with two glass plates ready for developing in the darkroom Arthur had built for himself in the cellar. He was somewhat taken aback to see the images slowly emerging of Frances, wearing a string of flowers in her hair, watching a quartet of dancing, winged fairies on a tree stump in front of her, and another showing Elsie sitting in the grass, greeting what the girls said was a gnome.

Arthur's Midg camera resides in the National Science and Media Museum in nearby Bradford. The museum's head of collections, Michael Terwey, reverently holds it up, explaining how it held a magazine of glass plates covered with photographic emulsion.

"People wanted to believe in the photographs," says Terwey. "The very idea that these beings had apparently been captured by a camera gave an air of scientific credibility. There were constant references made to the trustworthiness of the family, the fact they hadn't done it for money, so why would they make it up?"

Looking at the photographs now, with a sophisticated 21st-century eye, it seems incredible that anyone was taken in. It's obvious the fairies are what they were indeed later revealed to be: drawings by Elsie cut out and stuck in the ground with hatpins.

Still, the first two photographs weren't taken wholly seriously by the Wrights and might have remained a family joke but for Elsie's mother, Polly, who attended a meeting in Bradford of the Theosophical Society, the organisation set up in the 19th century to discuss and debate matters spiritual, religious and unexplained.

The talk was on fairies, and Polly showed the speaker the photographs Elsie and Frances had taken. The Theosophical Society was instantly captivated and displayed the pictures some months later at the society's annual meeting.

Elsie Wright in one of their famous Cottingley Fairies photographs

From there, they went viral, earning the clear stamp of approval from photography experts who declared them genuine, and eventually coming to the attention of Conan Doyle, who had been commissioned to write a feature on fairy lore for a magazine.

Conan Doyle secured permission from the Wrights to use the two photographs, and made a gift to the girls of a Kodak Cameo camera to obtain further "evidence", which they duly did, producing three more images of Frances smiling at a leaping fairy, a fairy offering a posy of harebells to Elsie, and another captioned "The Fairies and Their Sun-Bath", all of which were published in 1920.

In a 1983 letter to Geoffrey Crawley, a journalist who had written extensively about the Cottingley Fairies, Elsie finally admitted how she and Frances had taken the pictures, and said they persisted with the story for so many years because they didn't want to embarrass all the people who had believed them, Conan Doyle especially, and waited until everyone had died before admitting the hoax.

Arthur Wright was always uncomfortable with the attention the photographs brought on his family. He died in 1926, still frustrated that Elsie and Frances had never owned up.

The very idea that these beings had been captured by a camera gave an air of scientific credibility

Polly, who was really responsible for the photographs reaching so wide an audience, lived until 1955. Elsie, who emigrated to America to escape all the attention, went on to live in India. She died in 1988, aged 87.

Frances died in 1986 and her memoirs, completed by her daughter Christine Lynch, were published under the title Reflections of the Cottingley Fairies. Frances maintained until her death that she had always seen fairies, and after publication of the interviews with Elsie claiming it was all just a hoax, relations between the two grew strained.

Fairies are still evident in Cottingley today. They haunt the village, in the cut-out fairies that adorn the gates of the Nuffield gym and in the housing estate. Every year there is a Cottingley Fairy Fest, which this year will mark the centenary of the photographs.

But, do people really see fairies?

Perhaps Mr Horsman is best placed to answer the question. "It's a great old Yorkshire tale, and it's fantastic to live in the house where it all happened," he tells me. "Have I ever seen fairies at the bottom of my garden? No."

And in the cool, dim bowels of the rooms at the Science and Media Museum in Bradford, where the artefacts linked to this fascinating, enduring tale are stored, Michael Terwey takes a similarly pragmatic view. "You have to remember that Elsie wasn't a child at the time, he says. "She actually had a job, working for a photographic studio in Bradford, where she touched up photographs.

"She had some technical knowledge, and here we have drawings she did of fairies that show she was a pretty good artist."

He pauses, considering the camera in his hands, given by Conan Doyle to Elsie and Frances in an attempt to marry science with the mysteries of the unexplained. "But Frances always maintained there actually were fairies. Just because these pictures are staged, that doesn't mean they're not there…"