

The John O'London Fairy Letters

www.fairyist.com



John O'London's Weekly (1919-1954) was an important inter-war British literary magazine. It had no fairy sympathies: in fact, one of the most important articles written against Conan Doyle and his Cottingley photographs had appeared in its pages in 1920. The magazine did have though a pleasing middle-brow register and its unpretentious style proved popular among the emerging British middle classes and the aspirational and, by this date, literate British working class. The letters' pages of *John O'London's Weekly*, where the following letters appeared, reflected the scattered interests of its enthusiastic reading public. A reader would often write in with a request or a reflection prompting a chain of responses. So in early 1936, one of these 'chains' concerned 'lovely sights' from around the world; another literary or Biblical epitaphs for a child's tomb; and, a third, mnemonic rhyming aids for British history. Then, 16 May 1936, a letter was published about a fairy experience in Wales among 'steady folk'. And the letter-writer, after recounting the story she had heard, asked whether 'any of your readers [can] give first-hand accounts of fairies seen in this country?'

We have included all the relevant letters here – among them one from Marjorie Johnson later secretary of the Fairy Investigation Society – in alphabetical rather than chronological order as there is little dialogue between them and no sense of a developing argument. These letters are one of the most important early twentieth-century fairy collections and have been largely neglected.

Beer, I.W. 'Fairies Are Not Dead!', *John O'London Weekly* (4 April 1936), 34.

Sir,

Most of the stories of 'piskies' or little people recently published seem to emanate from the South or West Country, but here is a first-hand account of one of them seen quite lately in more matter-of-fact Hertfordshire.

I was driving a car through a quiet country lane and my thoughts at the time were solely on the car's performance. Rounding a bend in the road, where the hedge and trees had been cut down to the ground, I was suddenly surprised to see a little round-faced fellow wearing a pointed cap, the peak of which fell over one side, nightcap fashion. He was sitting on a tree stump and looking straight across the road in front of him.

Standing, I judged he would be nearly a foot and a half high, but he was gone in an instant and though I slowed down at once I did not get the chance to have a closer look at him.

The sight made a vivid impression on me – and is not likely to be easily forgotten.

Redbourn Herts

I.W. Beers

Chadwick, Joyce 'Fairies Are not Dead!', *John O'London Weekly* (21 March 1936), 986.

Sir,

One of your correspondents asks (March 7) for first-hand accounts of 'fairies' seen in this country, and proceeds to relate two very interesting stories of what West-countrymen would, I think, call Piskies.

A few years ago on the Cornish-Devonian border, I was surprised to see on the cliff above me the figure of a tiny man, dressed in black, strutting round in a rather vain-looking way. So incredulous was I of the existence of the 'pisky' people that I said to myself, 'In a minute I shall see what he really is – a bird, or a shadow.' But no, he went on being a tiny man – until he changed into a quite indescribable thing (are not piskies' Irish cousins known as the 'shape-changers?'); something with the appearance of a long, furry black roll, which gambolled about on the grass and then disappeared. A few minutes later, however, to more little shapes became visible – slightly larger and much rounder than the first pisky-man. They were sitting one on either side of a gorse bush, making movements similar to those made in sawing with a two-handled saw. Curiosity impelled closer investigation – but the short cut I took up the cliff ended in unclimbable steepness and rubble, and I was obliged to return to the shore. By the time I had reached the gorse-bush by the usual path the pisky-sawyers were gone. Nothing except a form of air, though, could have sat on air as the sawer on the seaside must have been doing – for the bush hung some inches over the cliff edge. There was a somewhat amusing sequel a few days later when I again saw and tried to come near to a group of 'good' (?) people – but my letter is already too long.

London W1

Joyce Chadwick

Craigen, J.H 'An Encounter with a Fairy', *John O'London's Weekly* (2 May 1936), 167.

Sir,

I have been deeply interested in recent letters from readers who claim to have seen fairies.

Near my home in Co. Derry there is rich grazing plain of about eighty acres, which pastures annually a large herd of cattle. Three of its sides are fringed with a plantation, and the other by a thick wood.

On a certain summer evening about twenty years ago, five men, employees on this estate, were engaged in dredging the canal which runs through the middle of the plain. One of the labourers, who was a little in advance of his fellows, approached a thorn bush which grew on the side of the rampart, and there he had the unique experience of seeing a little man about 18 inches tall with a conical hat and a red coat come out of the side of the bank and dart off as quickly as a rabbit. The man shouted to his companions, who came running up in time to see their friend racing after the conspicuous figure in the red coat. The pursuer was a good runner, but the wee red-coat soon outdistanced him, and although he continued the pursuit with his companions behind him, it faded into obscurity at another rampart on the edge of the plantation. No further trace of it could be discovered.

These men had always been sceptical as regards the supernatural, yet to this day they swear that they actually did see a fairy.

Money more, Co. Derry

J.H.Craigen,

Fraser, W.J. 'Invaded a Bedroom', *John O'London's Weekly* (11 April 1936), p. 65.

Sir,

When I was a boy of ten we lived in Lanarkshire beside a large park with trees and flowers. At early dawn one morning I awoke to see on a chair, which always stood beside my bed, two small old women of about 18ins. Tall. Each wore tall, conical dark hats and dark, long gowns. They looked at me for about twenty seconds and then smiled to each other before jumping in slow motion to the carpeted floor, where they passed from my line of sight. Very gently I eased myself up into a sitting position, so as not to scare them, but they had disappeared. I got out of the bed, peered under all the furniture and into the cupboard, but could find no trace of them. The moon was full, and red streaks showed in the sky./ They were solid beings: I noted that their busts stood out clearly against the window across the room. It all happened forty years ago, but it has never gone from my mind. They seemed to appraise me as a horse-dealer might do a horse. There was really no affection in their eyes, and the feeling I had then was that I should have liked to catch them in my hands like birds.

Milngavie, Dumbartonshire,

W.J. Fraser

Gray, Hilda 'Fairies Are Not Dead!', *John O'London's Weekly* (6 June 1936), 347.

Sir,

I have read with interest the recent correspondence on fairies. In August, 1931, several fairies – female without wings, wearing some sort of flimsy transparent gowns – were seen by myself and eldest daughter on eight occasions among the flowering shrubs at the bottom of our garden in Warwickshire, which was bounded by a brook. I saw the same little lady on three separate days, as she wore a pink gown, while the others wore bluish ones. She was so shy that she only peeped at me around a bush, and disappeared when I was about ten paces off. She was not afraid, I thought, so much as anxious to avoid close intimacy with mere humans. They were about a foot and a half high, and looked like 'sweet seventeens' reduced in height, but they were simply lovely in face, form and movement. I cannot get their loveliness out of my mind.

London, S.W. 15

(Mrs) Hilda Gray

Hill, I 'A Tryst with a Fairy', *John O'London Weekly* (23 May 1936), 281.

Sir,

I have followed with keen interest your letters from various readers who have seen fairies. Of course there are fairies, only one is rather backward in telling of them. As a little girl of six or seven I would never tread upon daisies because it was in a daisy field I saw my first fairies. There were usually seven or eight together, dancing in circles about three feet from the ground. They had long pointed caps, thin bodies tapering off to very pointed feet. I remember their puckish grins and seem to remember them as being dressed in brown.

Then, just before I reached my teens, on many occasions I kept tryst with a lovely fairy in a bower of wild roses near to my home. Looking back now it seems I was always aware of this fairy in that leafy nook. She was usually a few feet from the ground, in shining pink rainment, with long golden tresses, and always in a pink aura. The fairy never stayed long in my presence, but it seemed quite natural to me that she should be there.

Wigan,

I. Hill

James, Kenneth A. 'Was It a Fairy' *John O'London's Weekly* (5 September, 1936), 812.

Sir,

I had read with amusement the descriptions of fairies given by your various correspondents. They entertained me, but left me unconvinced. That was my reaction until –

I was sitting alone one night, writing. It was late; everybody else had gone to bed. With a flourish I turned over a page. The draught it created blew a paper (a laundry bill, incidentally) off the table to the floor. I saw it flutter down, and went on writing. (I was not going to let a laundry bill interrupt my romantic cogitations).

Some two minutes later I rattled through another page, having entirely forgotten the paltry bill at my feet. It was with mild astonishment, then, that when I turned the next page I beheld the same bill fluttering floorwards again. I concluded that my first experience was pure imagination, but when the same thing happened the third time I bounded up and searched for the invisible person playing the trick on me.

Then I went down on my hands and knees to see how many bills had conglomerated on the floor. I found only a solitary one – the laundry bill. I picked it up, secured it to the table, sat down, and tried to collect my startled wits. It was a failure, and so I went to bed in a daze. But until I fell asleep I seemed to sense the presence of somebody else in that room.

Who or what was it?

Sydney

Kenneth A James

Johnson, Marjorie 'An Elf Described', *John O'London's Weekly* (28 March 1936), p. 1023.

Sir,

I shall never forget an experience I had as a child. The house in which I then lived was surrounded by beautiful garden and orchard, and was near wood and fields in a lonely part of Nottingham. On this particular morning I was lying in bed enjoying the early morning sunshine which streamed in through the low, open window, when suddenly I felt compelled to sit up in bed and turn my eyes to the empty firegrate. There, on a filmy cobweb on the bars, sat a strange little creature. It seemed quite unafraid and, from the broad grin on its face, appeared to enjoy my observation. At first I just kept still and stared, and it blinked back at me with a blank expression which showed very little intelligence. Soon I had to satisfy my childish curiosity by climbing out of bed. The elf immediately disappeared. I climbed back, and when I turned round it was perched in the same place. This disappearance and reappearance continued until I was brushed away the cobweb. I never saw the nature sprite again.

I should say it was from 4in. to 6in. in height; its ears were very large, and its body was of a glimmering green colour. Mr Geoffrey Hodson bears out this statement in his book of observations on *The Fairies at Work and at Play*. He says: 'Elves differ from other nature-spirits chiefly in that they do not appear to be clothed in any reproduction of human attire, and that they bodily constitution appears to consist of one solid mass of gelatinous substance, entirely without interior organisation.'

Edward Seago, the artist, in a true account of his adventures in Ireland, *Sons of Sawdust*, tells us how he came to believe in the Little People when he saw how they had plaited the horses' manes. 'The braids consisted of only a few strands of hair, and were far too small for any mortal hand to have made.'

Shortly, afterwards, by a strange coincidence, I read a Norwegian tale, *Beyond Sing the Woods*, by Trygve Golbrandsen, in which a similar happening is described.

Your correspondent writes, with truth, that we who sees [sic] fairies are chary of relating our experiences. Is there any wonder, when the majority of people think us mad?

I am quite willing to answer any sincere questions put to me by interested readers.

Nottingham

Marjorie Johnson

[The editor has added afterwards] We are willing to publish correspondence on this subject, but readers are reminded that they must furnish their name and addresses as a guarantee of good faith.

Kerr, John 'Revels Round a Bush', *John O'London's Weekly* (11 April 1936), p. 65.

Sir,

During the late summer of 1934, I stayed at the Hills Hotel in Largs, Ayrshire. One very hot afternoon, about four o'clock, I was walking in the grounds with a Kilmarnock lady, a resident, when she drew my attention to a large flowering shrub over twelve feet high. At a distance we could see small forms whirling around the blooms, and on closer inspection we saw that a host of fairy forms were at play. I was so astonished that I foolishly went to the large shrub, shook the lower branches, and stepped back to see if the forms were still there. They were, but soon disappeared among the blooms, and we did not see them again. We mentioned it to the manager, who said that another resident had seen fairies in the grounds. He had suspected that his informant was 'soft in the head', and had paid no attention to the story. I consider myself hard-headed, but I did see things that afternoon. It was the first time such an experience had befallen me, and until that moment I should have laughed at anyone who maintained that fairies are real beings.

Paisley

John Kerr

Lampeter, E. Bayly 'Fairies are Not Dead!', *John O'London's Weekly* (7 March 1936), 885.

Sir,

Can any of your readers give first-hand accounts of fairies seen in this country? There seem to be many who do see them, but who are chary of relating their experiences. In this part of Wales some queer things happen occasionally. An elderly woman once saw a crowd of tiny men a meadow on a moonlit evening one February. She stood still, peeped through the hedge, and watched them gather round a little lady who sat in their midst on a stone. She told them various things that the woman could understand, for they spoke in Welsh. One was that they should not be able to use the meadow much longer, for a rich man would buy it and build a house there, and keep a carriage to run the roads without horses. There was then no idea of such a thing in the village. However, in the course of a year, it came to pass. This is a first-hand account.

I have been told of queer, round, goblin shapes on high legs, that escort people along lonely roads after dark, hopping and skipping in front and then leaping a high gate and disappearing into the grounds of gardens or of learned colleges. And the tellers of these tales are steady folk. Wales.

E Bayly Lampeter

M.E.H., 'Fairies and Pixies', *John O'London Weekly* (11 July 1936), 544.

Sir,

I wonder if any of the correspondents who have written in such good faith, and I believe quite earnestly too, about Leprechauns, Little People, and Fairies can tell where I can obtain a genuine photograph of any of these interesting things. I inquire because, although I am a romantic person myself, I am, unfortunately, living in a very material age.

Richmond, Surrey

M.E.H

N.V.M. ‘An Encounter with a Fairy’, *John O’London Weekly* (16 May 1936), 245.

Sir,

After reading Mr J.H.Craigen’s letter (May 2nd), may I state that I have had a very similar experience? In 1916 I was staying at Cookham Dean, Berkshire, and one afternoon took a basket in order to gather blackberries on a common some distance away. The blackberries were fairly plentiful but small, when I suddenly noticed some particularly fine ones growing on a bush which stood quite by itself. I was tugging at some rather out of reach, when the whole bush seemed to shiver, the sprays parted, and from out of the centre of the bush darted a lean, brown man, dressed in brown with pointed cap and straggly beard. He was solid as far as the waist, but his legs were transparent and shadowy. He slid away like lightning and entirely disappeared. I regret to say that I was so surprised and startled that I dropped my basket, took to my heels, and ran all the way home. I do not doubt that he was the ‘fairy’ of the bush. I have never had the good luck to see another.

Pulborough, Sussex

NVM

R.S. 'Fairies and the Imagination' *John O' London's Weekly* (8 August 1936), 680.

Sir,

I do not question in any way the sincerity of those of your readers who have written to you during recent months on the subject of fairies. It may be, however, that they have been the innocent victims of a trick of the brain.

Under favourable conditions, the brain probably has the capacity to produce the image of something which is symbolical of an emotion that is being experienced.

The condition favourable to the belief that fairies are being seen would seem to be that the right type of person should be in an abnormal state of ecstasy owing to the enjoyment of the beauty of the immediate surroundings.

Hull

R.S.

Robertson, Struan 'Fairies Are Not Dead!', *John O'London Weekly* (28 March 1936), 1023.

Sir,

As a student of 'Faerie' and 'The Sight' I was particularly pleased that you gave space to E Bayly Lampeter's inquiry (March 7). Let me briefly describe four experiences.

The first fairy I met was alone upon a hillside near Aberfoyle, where Robert Kirk wrote his *Commonwealth of Fairies*. She was very friendly, beckoned me to follow her, and eventually showed me the most wonderful of sights.

One afternoon in Arran I saw ten fairies playing out and in among gorse bushes and round about the grazing sheep. The sheep were quite undisturbed except that if a fairy went too near one of them it would trot off for a few yards.

Wandering in a wood in Arran one morning I heard the silvery, plangent accents of fairies, and following the sounds I saw quite a clan of them hurrying along a green footpath. They seemed angry about something. Observing me, they chattered loudly, scattered as one sees a flock of excited sparrows scattering, increased their speed and fled.

Tramping near Loch Rannoch I was attracted by tuneful tones coming from clumps of rhododendrons, and advancing cautiously beheld the most beautiful dancing. I was too interested to count the number of fairies, concentrating upon how close I could get. When I was within ten paces of them one sighted me, and alarming the dancers she shepherded them in among the bushes. I shall never forget the glance she gave me as she disappeared and the gesture and grace of her exit, I have seen approached only by the incomparable, Pavlova herself.

Struan Robertson

Buchlyvie, Stirlingshire

Stephens, Doris G. 'Fairies Are Not Dead', *John O'London's Weekly* (11 April 1936), p. 65.

Sir,

I have read with interest the recent letters from correspondents who claim to have seen fairies.

During the war we lived in the heart of the Welsh countryside, four miles from a town, and one afternoon in June, at the time of the hay harvest, the following incident occurred.

My mother and I were sitting in the garden with two maids. Suddenly she pointed to a neighbouring field, in which the hay had only just been cut. 'How very early the farmer and his workers have started raking the hay,' she said. 'It cannot have had time to dry.' I looked in the direction she indicated and I could see lines of figures going backwards and forwards, apparently busy raking the hay. We called the two maids, who also noticed the lines of figures.

That evening we met the farmer and asked him why the raking in that particular meadow had been started so early. He said we must be mistaken. He had walked past the field that afternoon, and there was no one there at all!

It seemed as if we had witnessed a kind of psychic phenomenon. From the earliest times fairies have been said to show a fondness for copying the work of human beings, and quite possibly it was some of these creatures we had seen.

Carmarthen, S. Wales

Doris G. Stephens