

# Fairies, Elves, Pixies, and Gnomes

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Fairies, pixies, elves, and other related creatures are typically characterized as being diminutive, sometimes winged beings of more or less human form, possessing magical or supernatural powers and living in forest glades, gardens, or other watered and green spaces. Gnomes are historically described as diminutive as well but are generally portrayed as being deformed, crippled, or grotesque; they are sometimes subterranean creatures and are usually said to guard and protect secrets or treasure. These and similar creatures may be good or evil, benevolent or malicious, depending on the story or account. These mythical beings are often said to generally avoid human contact. References to these types of creatures date back several centuries and are most prominent in northern European folklore and literature.

Although no objective, modern scientific evidence concretely documenting these creatures exists, there are true believers. Personal recollections of firsthand encounters with such creatures have been around for as long as the folklore and literature describing them. The explanation given for the lack of credible evidence usually revolves around the description of these beings and their inherent properties. Generally speaking, these creatures are said to only be seen by:

- Certain types of people (the open-minded and willing, the pure of heart, innocent children, and so forth)

- Those having some predisposition to the special ability or skill required to witness or even summon the creatures
- Accident, surprise, or stealth (as by an individual upon waking from sleep or surreptitiously stumbling upon creatures, while remaining undetected by them)
- Those possessing some thing or some quality that makes or forces the creatures to reveal themselves to witnesses

In some explanations, it is forbidden or dangerous for the creatures to reveal themselves to humans, which helps to account for their severe reluctance to be discovered. Some reports use the presence of “telltale” markings or manifestations such as fairy rings, stone circles, hollow hills, or other earthly indications as proof of their existence. Upon realizing they have been discovered, the creatures are sometimes said to disappear, leaving no trace or evidence aside from the witnesses’ accounts. This inherent inability to conclusively prove or disprove the existence of such beings reinforces the mystery and enchantment surrounding the stories.

The most documented, highly touted, and widespread account relating the supposed existence of fairies began in 1917 in the Yorkshire village of Cottingley, England. Photographs taken by two young girls (Elsie Wright, age sixteen, and her cousin Frances Griffiths, age ten) became the center of a con-



Elsie Wright with her photograph of the Cottingley fairies, which she and Frances Griffiths faked in 1917–1920. (Fortean Picture Library)

trov­ersy that lasted for over sixty years. Two photographs taken in the glen behind their home in 1917 appeared to show the girls cavorting with a number of small, winged, humanoid creatures that the children insisted were fairies and a gnome.

The girls vehemently denied any impropriety whatsoever in the creation of the photographs, sparking both the interest and the incredulity of their friends and neighbors. It wasn't until three years later, however, after being approached by Spiritualists to further document the existence of these fairies, that the girls achieved international fame regarding their tale. That year, they produced three more photographs of the apparently supernatural beings.

The photographs were published in *Strand Magazine*, with a supporting article written by a seemingly unlikely author—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of the analytical detective Sherlock Holmes. Although Doyle's fictional

detective was steadfast in his logical approach to the unusual or unexplained, Doyle himself had a penchant for the mystical, and he was a fervent Spiritualist. He eagerly became a believer in the “fairy tale” after various photography experts at the time were unable or unwilling to declare that the photographs were fakes. Without conclusive evidence of tampering and with the firm resolve of the two girls to stick to their story, the Theosophists and Spiritualists of the day heralded the pictures as proof of the existence of fairies. This claim, of course, was the focus of some controversy. Among the most vocal critics was Harry Houdini, the acclaimed magician, illusionist, and friend to Doyle. Houdini quickly and adamantly criticized his friend for his all-too-eager acceptance of the photos and the explanation given for them.

The Cottingley fairy photos (as they came to be called) drifted in and out of controversy until 1982, when their true origins were finally

revealed. In an interview with Joe Cooper, Wright and Griffiths, who were in their seventies and eighties at the time, finally admitted that at least four of the photos were complete frauds. They were divided on whether the final picture had been faked, however. Elsie stated quite firmly that it too was a hoax, but Frances resolutely repeated her claim that they had accidentally photographed the fairies she and Elsie said they had seen in the Cottingley glen when they were children. Both women died professing their belief in the existence of fairies, despite their admission that the photographs were fabrications of their childhood imaginations.

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