

Cottingley Fairies

The real story



A Read the story about fairies. Do you like it? Why (not)?

1917 was the year in which the mystery was born, and it was perhaps one of the biggest mysteries in England at the time. It all started in West Yorkshire, or, more precisely, in a small village called Cottingley.

Two young cousins, ten-year-old Frances and sixteen-year-old Elsie, were happily spending their holidays together in the countryside.

The girls' mothers were sisters, so both families would stay together in this small village surrounded by picturesque houses, stunningly beautiful English forests, green meadows and sloped hills. Elsie and Frances frequently spent their time playing by the clear creeks and venturing into the nearby forest.

Every day the girls would return with their hands and feet wet, covered in mud.

'What were you doing?' their parents asked. 'Look at your hands and feet!'

The girls remained silent. There was an air of mystery in their eyes. Frances wanted to say something, but Elsie would keep her quiet.

'We play by the creek,' Elsie said. 'We make mud cookies.'

'You shouldn't get this dirty. It is not very proper for a young lady,' said Frances's mum. 'Can't you play with the doll house in the garden?'

'We are obviously too old for dolls,' Elsie almost said, but then she remembered that making mud cookies was also something only little children would do, so she kept quiet. Instead, the girls went to the bathroom and washed up.

The parents shrugged their shoulders and moved on with their usual evening conversations, which would usually include drinking tea and talking about politics.

Mornings were beautiful in Cottingley, which took pride in its fresh air and green gardens covered in dew. The smell of breakfast woke the girls up and they stormed down the stairs, chattering with joy.

'Can't you stay in the garden today?' asked Frances's mother. 'You get me really worried wondering about in the woods.'

'But mother,' said Frances, 'we want to go and play by the creek!'

'What is so fascinating about the creek?' asked Elsie's mother. 'Why can't you stay somewhere nearby?'

The girls looked at each other. There was obviously something on their minds that they didn't want to share so easily. Suddenly, Frances broke the silence.

'We play with fairies. That's why our feet and hands get muddy. We reach out to grab them, but fall down, and it happens every time, then...'

'Shut up, Frances!' said Elsie. 'Mother, she is making things up!'

Both of the mothers stared at the girls.

'Aren't you a little too old to believe in fairies?' asked Frances's mother.

'She is!' Elsie answered for her. 'But it *is* fun to spend time near the creek.'

Can we go today? I promise, we'll be careful this time!'

The mothers looked at each other and sighed quietly.

'Alright. But we shall not tolerate you behaving like small children. You shall not get yourselves dirty. Also, go somewhere near the garden. And do not be late for lunch!'

The girls nodded, dressed themselves and went into the woods.

Hours passed quickly, and it was time for lunch. The table was laid and the parents were at their usual places around it. However, the girls' chairs were still empty.



'Those rascals!' said Frances's father. 'They're up to no good these days.' His friend, Elsie's father, agreed with an angry gesture with which he put his nose high in the air.

'Children these days are not nearly as polite as we were in our time,' he proclaimed.

'We clearly told them not to be late for lunch!' responded Elsie's mother. 'I think we ought to keep them at home until the end of summer holidays.'

They all waited a bit, but the girls did not arrive.

'That's it,' said Frances's father. 'We should go and find them and make them apologise. It is not fit for young ladies to stay out entire days, not to mention in all kinds of danger. There may be wolves in these forests!'

The mothers gasped in concern. They were all preparing to leave the table when they heard the girls whispering in the adjacent hall.

The mothers rushed to the dining room doors and opened them. Both of the girls looked guilty, with their feet and beautiful lace dresses covered in mud.

'This is too much!' yelled the mothers. 'Go wash yourselves, and go to your room! Forget about lunch! You must think about your behaviour!'

'But mother,' cried Frances. 'We saw them! They call to us, and we reach out to them, but they always get away. Then we fall, and fall again!'

This time her cousin Elsie was silent.

'Enough with your stories!' said Frances's mother. 'Imagined stories are lies, and you must not tell lies, especially to parents!'

'She is not lying!' shouted Elsie, and everybody looked at her in surprise. 'We DID see fairies! Real fairies, not made up ones!'

'That will be enough!' the parents said in unison. 'Go to your room! And no more forest for either of you!'

The girls went to the bathroom to wash their feet and hands and to change their mud-stained dresses.

'Maybe we shouldn't have told them,' said Elsie to her cousin. 'I don't want to be called a liar!'

'Shhh,' answered Frances. 'I've got an idea. But I shall tell it to you later!'

The evening wouldn't come quickly enough, and the girls were invited to dinner, which they ate hastily. There was something mischievous in their eyes as this time as they had a real plan: a plan that must work; a plan that would show everyone that they were not liars.

It was around six o'clock the next morning when the two girls snuck down the stairs. The wood under their feet creaked, and they were concerned that even the slightest noise would wake somebody up. Elsie was carrying something in her hands. It was her father's camera, a big dark one, which was considered to be pricey at the time, as Elsie's father was an amateur photographer.

The front door quietly closed behind them.

The Cottingley fairies were an early 20th century phenomenon.

The girls took a photo with Frances's face in the foreground, and fairies dancing around it. The photo produced an immediate effect: a lot of people believed the fairies actually existed, even though Elsie's father dismissed it as a prank.

Experts at the time claimed it was impossible to fake such a photo, and the girls became famous. Even the writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who wrote the famous Sherlock Holmes books, believed the girls' story and carried out his own research into the matter. There were so many questions. Did they really fake the photos? And if they did, how?



They were only two young girls. How could they deceive so many people, especially experts?

And the most important question still remained: Did people want to believe in fairies? The answer is clear. Apparently they did. And they still do, to some extent. So it was somewhat sad when, 54 years later, an old woman named Elsie was asked the same question all over again:

'Are they trick photographs? Did you fake them?'

The old woman responded: 'I'd rather leave that open, if you don't mind...but my father had nothing to do with it, I can promise you that...'



And that was the end of the story at the time, with the mystery of the fairies expected to be soon forgotten.

However, no one noticed the glance that Elsie sent to another old woman standing next to her. It was somewhat mysterious. That woman, who was Frances, responded with a smile.

Today, Cottingley is still being visited by tourists with cameras. They are searching for something that was quite possibly there a hundred years ago. And there are no more Elsie and Frances to tell you what really happened. Is it worth discovering?

Glossary

picturesque
sloped hills

very pretty or charming: like a painted picture
ground that slants downward or upward; an area of land on a mountain that is used for skiing

to venture
proper

to go somewhere that is unknown, dangerous, etc.

to proclaim
to storm

behaving in a way that is correct according to social or moral rules

to chatter
to sigh

to say or state something in a public, officially, or in a definite way

rascal
to gasp

to go quickly and in a loud way

to talk in a quick or casual way

to take a deep, audible breath

a young person who causes trouble or does things that annoy people
to breathe in suddenly and loudly with your mouth open because of surprise, shock, or pain

adjacent
lace

close or near: sharing a border, wall, or point

hastily

a very thin and light cloth made with patterns of holes

mischievous
to creak

done or made very quickly

showing a playful desire to cause trouble

pricey

the sound made by an old floor when you walk over it

immediate

expensive

something happening now

to some extent

to the certain point

glance

a quick look

B Answer the questions and discuss.

- 1 What is your first impression of Cottingley? Try to describe it by using your senses. Do you know any similar old town or village?
- 2 In which way are Frances and Elsie related?
- 3 At first the parents paid no attention to the girls' ventures to the forest. When did they become suspicious?
- 4 What do you think was the proper behaviour for children in those days? What were they expected to do?
- 5 What made the girls say they'd seen some fairies?
- 6 Explain the word "phenomenon" and relate it to the story.
- 7 Do you think the girls were telling a lie? Think about this: if the story were a lie, why would they stick to it for so long?

**WRITING****C Look up for the following paragraph from the text:**

*'Shhh,' answered Frances. 'I've got an idea. But I shall tell it to you later!'
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The girls went to their room. Imagine you were there too and heard their conversation. Write it down in a dialogue. You can decide whether the girls were lying or not.

HOMEWORK**D Are you feeling curious?**

The story is based on real events. If you want to explore them further or see the photographs in question, write "Cottingley fairies" into a search engine and see where it takes you.

