

CORNWALL

WHERE THE LAND SPEAKS

THE WOODS THE COAST THE MOORS

Abstract

This thesis, “Where the Land Speaks,” explores the symbiotic connection between the Cornish landscape and its rich folklore, arguing that the land itself communicates through its stories and traditions. By focusing on the woods, the coast, and the moors, the study investigates how these landscapes shape and are shaped by the narratives of droll tellers and local legends. It highlights the importance of preserving Cornwall’s Celtic identity, threatened by modern uniformity, by rekindling the spirit and meaning of its folktales.

Drawing on concepts such as Marc Augé’s “non-place,” this thesis examines how Cornwall’s unique oral traditions, influenced by its “periphery phenomena,” are evolving in the face of globalisation. By analysing specific sites, from Draynes Woodland to Rough Tor, the research demonstrates how narratives of King Arthur, giants, saints, and spectral forces imbue the landscape with cultural and emotional depth.

To complement this research, I have created a series of short films, designed to offer a perspective akin to that of Cornish

audiences listening to droll tellers. These films serve as an immersive extension of the thesis, allowing the reader to fully engage with the sublime landscapes that have inspired these stories for generations. Through spoken word and evocative visuals, they recreate the experience of hearing these tales in the very environments that shaped them, where the moors whisper with the voices of the past, the woods creak with unseen presences, and the waves carry the echoes of lost legends.

Ultimately, this thesis posits that Cornwall’s folklore acts as a means of shaping perception and reinforcing a sense of place, ensuring that the land continues to “speak” to those who listen.



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Walking Notes and Disclaimer

This study will take us to 3 types of landscapes in Cornwall, that capture the essence of place in which droll tellers once roamed, these being the Woods, The Coast and The Moors. Such landscapes are all filled with unique stories, and tall tales, which are set in a truly beautiful part of the world. Many are not documented in this study but can be found easily online.

This study of folkloric sites took place during the winter of 2024/25. These places change dramatically throughout the seasons and can appear quite different at other times of the year.

All images are the authors unless stated otherwise.

If you wish to explore these locations for yourself, please plan your trips carefully. Check access rights, public footpaths, and weather conditions. Bring the supplies you'll need, such as food and water, to stay prepared for the duration of your adventure. Walking with a companion is both safer and more enjoyable.

For coastal visits, always check tide times and stay cautious around steep drops and uneven paths.





Introduction



Cornwall and the Southwest means many things to many people, but to me, and countless others, it is a land steeped in magic, myth, and legend. This is a place where folklore, as ancient as the earth itself, is woven into the cliffs and moors. Celtic settlements remain alive in the imagination, inhabited by piskies, while standing stones whisper tales of giants roaming the rugged landscape. Together, they create a vivid mosaic of Cornish cultural history, one that now risks being half-forgotten. The Cornish language, once spoken for millennia to recount heroic feats and impart moral lessons, now lingers in dusty books tucked away in forgotten corners of libraries. The descendants of the Celtic people, who carry the echoes of this ancient culture, are increasingly moving from the area due to the pressures of the 21st century: a struggling seasonal economy, the emigration of young people seeking opportunity elsewhere, and shifting ways in which we consume stories and engage with the landscape (Payton, 2017, p.2). Once, it might have taken three days to travel from Penzance to Plymouth by horse-drawn carriage, a journey often shared with a weary traveller sharing drolls (stories) to pass the time (Hunt, 1871, p.26). Today, such journeys are made quickly, often silently, and the voices of the past grow quieter. Yet the magic of Cornwall endures, waiting to be rediscovered in its windswept moors and ancient stones.

Philip Payton, a leading Cornish historian, has authored and edited numerous works on Cornwall's history and culture, including the frequently updated *Cornwall: A History* (2017). He has also collaborated with other writers on topics related to Cornwall's heritage. In 1981, Payton was honoured as a Bard of Gorsedh Kernow, a non-political organisation dedicated to preserving and promoting Cornwall's Celtic spirit. Widely regarded as an authority on Cornwall, his research is frequently cited by other scholars referenced in this thesis. While such frequent citation might appear to create an academic echo chamber, his role within Gorsedh Kernow ensures his work is rigorously reviewed and rooted in cultural authenticity. Payton has drawn attention to the alarming decline of Cornwall's ancient culture and Celtic identity, which he sees as being eroded by the homogenising forces of urbanisation. He argues that 'Cornishness' has been overwhelmed by a push toward modern uniformity, making the preservation of this unique heritage increasingly urgent. This perspective resonates with the motivations of Robert Hunt, whose work, *Popular Romances of the West of England; or, The Drolls, Traditions, and Superstitions of Old Cornwall* (1871), was similarly inspired by the desire to preserve fading traditions. Hunt, nostalgic for the stories of his youth in Bodmin; a town steeped in legends of devils, huntsmen, and monks, embarked on a quest to rediscover these tales, only to find that many had already been forgotten. Alongside these stories, Hunt realised, the very tradition of sharing Cornish folktales was also vanishing (Hunt, 1871, p.20). Both Payton and Hunt emphasise the importance of cultural preservation, reminding us that Cornwall's essence lies not only in its physical landscapes but also in its stories, which serve as the soul of its identity. Without efforts to protect these narratives and traditions, Cornwall risks losing the rich heritage that makes it unique.

At the time of writing, and for the past century or so, Cornwall has become a victim of what anthropologist Marc Augé describes as a “change in scale.” In his seminal work, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Augé defines the concept of “non-place” as spaces stripped of their history, identity, and meaning in the face of rapid globalisation. He argues that, in a world moving at unprecedented speed, with access to endless information and constant expansion of human endeavours, local stories and traditions are often reduced to minor footnotes in a globalised context (Augé, 1995, p. 31). Cornwall, once a land of rich, unbounded oral storytelling shared with travellers and companions against the backdrop of its evocative landscapes, has seen many of these voices fall silent. Augé might describe Cornwall as a “place” that has slowly been evolving into a “non-place” (Augé, 1995). This transformation likely began during Robert Hunt’s time writing his book *Popular Romances of the West of England*, as he attempted to gather the fading stories from his youth. In this shift towards modernity, Cornwall’s rich tapestry of stories and traditions has increasingly given way to a global sameness. Yet, Augé suggests that places are never entirely lost. Over time, they can reconstitute themselves through the formation of new memories and the rediscovery and celebration of old traditions, albeit often in modernised formats (Augé, 1995).

When Robert Hunt began collecting folklore, he acknowledged that the oral tradition in which these stories were rooted was at odds with the written format. He remarked: “Old-world stories which had been collected under the circumstances described would, perhaps, never have taken their present form.” (Hunt, 1871, p.21) These tales were part of a Celtic oral tradition, and during the 19th century, many in Cornwall were steadfastly opposed to books, partly because literacy skills were still uncommon in the region. Cornwall was also undergoing a significant transition, shifting from relative isolation to greater integration with the rest of the country. This period marked the early stages of rapid globalisation, and as a result, people began to feel ashamed of their traditional stories, which were subsequently forgotten (Hunt, 1871, p.22).

Hunt, however, recognised the importance of his work; through his travels across Cornwall, he realised he was likely among the last of his generation to hear these tales first hand from what he described as “ancient peoples who have not a written history” (Hunt, 1871, p. 21-22). His efforts to preserve these stories became a crucial act of cultural preservation, capturing the voices of a fading oral tradition before they were lost to time, many of which are re-emerging today. In this, Hunt was not merely an archivist but was, in his own way, engaging with the same impulses that drove Romantic-period artists to capture the sublime. As Edmund Burke described, the sublime was bound to awe, terror, and danger, with nature itself standing as the most powerful source of these overwhelming sensations (Riding, 2013). Just as Romantic painters such as Joseph Mallord William Turner sought to evoke the untamed grandeur of the natural world, Hunt’s collection of folklore reflected the same dramatic intensity, his stories filled with perilous cliffs, restless seas, and mysterious moors that suggested a landscape alive with unseen forces.

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Dolbadern Castle, J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851)



The Cheesewring atop Stowes Hill, photo taken by author mirroring the dramatic intensity evoked in Turners paintings in the Landscape of Robert Hunts Collections of Folklore.



Today, something new is happening in Cornwall; As contemporary generations establish their homes here and new families arrive, people are beginning to reconnect with this ancient land. Many explore their heritage, while those new to Cornwall, drawn by its echoes of legends, engage with its culture using modern tools. The very forces that once threatened to erase Cornwall's distinctiveness; ease of travel, global connectivity, and the internet, are now being harnessed to rediscover and share its stories, including this thesis. These echoes of the past are finding their place in the cultural Zeitgeist. While Cornwall's drolls (stories) may never return to their purest Celtic form (a topic explored in greater depth in the chapter: The Droll Tellers) they endure through Hunt's collections of romances and the tales passed down within families. Many of these stories continue to offer an ethical framework that acknowledges the rights and well-being of all entities, from the stones to the sea and all they sustain. Beyond this, they provide people with a profound sense of place, connecting them to the landscapes and traditions of Cornwall. Augé's theory suggests that "place" is ultimately defined by the richness of its narrative layers and the depth of its people's understanding, regardless of the format in which those stories are shared. Cornwall's evolving identity, shaped by both tradition and modernity, continues to remind us that places are living, dynamic entities, capable of renewal and reinvention.

“
Local narratives
tell us less about
‘history’ and more
about how people
construct their sense
of place and cultural
identity.”
(Bird, 2002, p519)



Narrative plays a pivotal role in the place-identity conversation, especially in the context of Cornwall, a region steeped in local legends whose origins are often obscured by time. Margaret Somers in the chapter *Deconstructing and Reconstructing Class Formation Theory: Narrativity, Relational Analysis, and Social Theory* argues that our sense of self is constructed through our location within social narratives and the networks we weave around them (Somers, 1997, p. 82). This perspective suggests that individuals construct their realities through stories, and while not all narratives serve the same purpose, collective stories of place can offer a connection to ancient identities. Elisabeth Bird builds on this point in her article *It Makes Sense to Us: Cultural Identity in Local Legends of Place*, suggesting how shared narratives, particularly folktales, are inherently tied to cultural markers like geography and ethnicity. These notions support that storytelling fosters a sense of belonging, allowing individuals to locate themselves within a cultural framework (Bird, 2002, p526).

Cornwall is often referred to as the land of King Arthur, its identity is intrinsically tied to the legendary figure. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae (History of the Kings of Britain)*, Tintagel Castle is the mythical site where Arthur was conceived, lived, and held court. The story recounts how Merlin magically disguised Uther Pendragon, enabling him to be with Igraine, Arthur's mother, at Tintagel (Geoffrey of Monmouth & Thorpe, 1984). Today, the ruins of Tintagel Castle stand as both a tourist attraction and a living embodiment of Arthurian lore. This lore is now filled with rich stories that not only draw visitors from around the world but also inspire a deep sense of pride among Cornish locals, who often identify with their heritage through these tales.

Gallos

(English: **Power**)

A statue at Tintagel
embodying of all the
kings of Cornwall
with holes exposing
the land and sea
behind

The significance of narrative in forging place identity lies in its ability to transcend the mere physicality of a location. Stories such as those of King Arthur imbue the landscape with meaning, transforming it from a geographic space into a cultural place. As Somers suggests, these narratives act as vessels of collective memory, connecting individuals to shared histories as well as reinforcing a sense of belonging because ‘we use ontological narratives to define who we are’ (Somers, 1997, p. 84). In Cornwall, these tales are more than entertainment; they are cultural artefacts that sustain traditions.

However, Cornwall is not just the land of King Arthur, but a land of myth and legends.

Rock Basin

Popular with druids and saints to bless their followers



Bronn Wennili
(English: **Brown Willy**)

I aim to analyse the evolving tradition of droll telling through a select few online retellings and its deep, symbiotic connection to the Cornish landscape. These tales are discussed in this thesis in relation to the locations that inspired them. Historically, droll tellers filled the minds of their listeners with many vivid images of landscapes they might never see; through their words alone, moors, cliffs, and caves came alive, charged with mystery and moral meaning.

This book serves as a lens to Cornwall, a region where captivating stories are born and nurtured, through a photographic catalogue of key sites in North Cornwall, places that invite engagement and participation in this enduring tradition. The locations explored here aim to rekindle the spirit and meaning of Cornish folktales, myths, and legends by offering a glimpse of old Cornwall. Just as Romantic artists and writers crafted the sublime to provoke awe and wonder, droll tellers wielded their narratives to transform the landscape into something more than physical terrain, it became an existential space, charged with history, emotion, and an eerie sense of unseen forces at play.

To accompany this written exploration, I have created a series of short films, designed to be listened to at the end of this thesis. These drolls, inspired by various collectors of Cornish folklore, are set within the landscapes discussed in this work. Through these films, you are invited to immerse yourself in the environment that shaped these tales, just as the droll tellers once transported their listeners into realms of myth and legend.

I invite you on a journey; a voyage to windswept caves along the coast, where saints once sought solace from the relentless Atlantic’s roar. We’ll wander deep into shadowed woods at the heart of the county, where the whispers of ancient kings linger still. Then we’ll traverse the haunting expanse of the moors, stepping back through the veil of time to chase giants lost in the swirling mists. Through these stories, past and present intertwine, shaping not only how we remember the land but how we continue to tell its tales.



The Droll Tellers

Folklore in Cornwall was, and still is on rare occasions,

communicated by wandering Droll Tellers

Storytellers who spread insight and humour across the Duchy,

often exchanging their tales for food,
shelter,
and, of course,
cyder.

Cornish/Kernewek :

Gans an Kernewek yn-un, an dybrydoryon ma a ylls yn awos ow kelwel an gathas a vynnans.

Gans an Kernewek yn-un, an dybrydoryon ma a ylls yn awos ow kelwel an gathas a vynnans.

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English: Speaking exclusively in the Cornish language, these individuals are now almost as elusive as the tales they told.

Wandering the moors, it is not uncommon to come across rugged, wind-swept ancient trees, their forms shaped and battered by the elements over countless years. As you walk in the footsteps of the droll tellers and chase the silhouettes of giants, you might find yourself seeking shelter behind one of these weathered sentinels. When the skies shift, you'll be grateful for its primitive embrace. Sitting beneath its gnarled branches, you might notice delicate strands of lichen commonly known as 'old man's beard' (Woodland Trust, 2025), clinging to the limbs above. It's easy to imagine that one or more wandering elders, perhaps storytellers themselves, have caught their beards in the branches, leaving a trail to guide you along the magical path of these timeless tales...

Though you must be careful that its not the
malevolent Bucca Gwidden trying to lead you astray.



Old Mans Beard
On a tree, Bodmin Moor





These individuals, known locally as Droll Tellers, were (and perhaps still are) wandering souls, that participate in age-old traditions of sea shanty singing and storytelling (Droll Telling). In the early 19th century, collectors of folkloric traditions, such as Robert Hunt, set out to document and record the rich tapestry of stories. During Hunt's walking tour of Cornwall, in which he attempted to gather up every existing tale of its ancient people, he unearthed the Droll Tellers. Droll Tellers at a time, a familiar presence in Cornwall, especially for those who frequented local inns. Yet, to the wider world, these storytellers were as enigmatic as the tales they told (James, 2022). Ronald M. James is a folklorist and historian and like Payton was elected as a Bard on the Gorsedh Kernow, for his work on Cornish Folklore, most notably '*The Folklore of Cornwall: The Oral Tradition of a Celtic Nation*' (2022). The book discusses how the 'droll tellers' helped to build a unique collection of legends and folktales, creating Cornwall's distinct body of oral tradition (James, 2022). James suggests that Droll Tellers are often compared to the more widely recognised Irish bards due to their shared Celtic origins. Irish bards were known for their meticulous preservation of oral history and legendary tales, ensuring accurate transmission across generations. However, British folklorist Katharine Briggs suggests that this comparison isn't entirely accurate. Unlike the bards, Droll Tellers embraced creativity, frequently adapting existing stories and inventing new ones on the spot (Briggs, 1978). While such improvisation was frowned upon in Ireland, in Cornwall, it was celebrated. The Droll Tellers were deeply embedded in their communities, often tailoring their tales to resonate with their audience. They would name beloved locals as the heroes of their stories, while those less favoured might find themselves cast as villains or demons to be vanquished, an approach that consistently delighted and captivated their listeners (James, 2022). These stories were told as legends, narratives meant to be believed, rather than as folktales, which leaned more toward fictional storytelling. To achieve this sense of believability, Droll Tellers would incorporate motifs familiar to their local audiences. Their wandering lifestyle entailed traveling from parish to parish and engaging with Cornwall's coasts, woodlands, and moors, which enriched their storytelling. These natural elements that were shared experiences among the people, provided a common foundation. This method of gathering motifs allowed Droll Tellers to weave layers of stories around prominent landmarks, such as standing stones, towering cliffs, hidden caves, and even the ancient tree you might find yourself taking shelter beneath (James, 2022). Additionally, many drolls served as cautionary tales, urging respect for the landscape to which they were deeply connected. These stories often carried moral lessons, teaching listeners to honour the natural world they were a part of and to live in harmony with their surroundings.



The Hurlers
Standing Stones, Bodmin Moor



St Cuthberts Cave
Holywell Bay Beach

Many drolls sought to impart important lessons about respecting nature, and the need for balance. They often warned against exploiting the land's gifts for selfish gain, emphasising that harmony with nature must be maintained to avoid misfortune. In these tales, those who acted out of greed or disregard for the natural world often faced dire consequences, such as being transformed into stones or trees, serving as powerful cautionary symbols for all that heard. These stories reinforced values of gratitude, humility, and encouraged one to live within their needs. By promoting stewardship of the land, they encouraged a deep sense of responsibility for preserving the environment, reminding us that nature's blessings come with the duty to protect them.

These ancient storytelling traditions breathed life into ever-evolving narratives of place, offering rituals, morals, warnings, and essential life lessons - alongside tales that would elicit hearty laughter. The Droll Tellers were creative narrators of the landscape and its people, keeping stories alive by passing them to the next generation with their own unique flourishes (James, 2022). Stories from other locations, outside of Cornwall and even further afield were often adopted by travelling droll tellers and retold in Cornwall. They would also take on new meanings, as if Cornwall left its unique fingerprint on them. This sentiment is echoed in Carl Wilhelm von Sydow work, he was a comparative folklorist, who was fascinated by early Celtic oral traditions, primarily Ireland due to their long-standing traditions, and how these tales influenced Germanic folktales (Sydow, 1934). Von Sydow studied how folktales evolve and transform as they spread from place to place using a scientific approach. He ultimately established the concept of Ecotype folklore, drawing a parallel between the evolution of stories and the principles of natural selection, just as some plants thrive in certain environments while others do not; folktales adapt to the cultural landscapes that sustain them (Sydow, 1934). This idea is particularly true of Cornish folklore, a tradition rich with countless stories that could be shared over many lifetimes. Like a thriving rainforest filled with diverse plant life, Cornwall's unique landscape provided the perfect environment for folklore to take root and flourish. As a remote peninsula, Cornwall exhibits what Ronald M. James refers to as “periphery phenomena,” where far-flung locations develop unique oral traditions due to their isolation. Without the “corrective measures” often imposed by audiences in central areas, storytellers in such regions enjoyed unbounded creative freedom, allowing their tales to grow and evolve organically (James, 2022). It could be considered that Robert Hunts literary accounts lack geographical context, stories that without place names appearing in them could be applied to any number of locations. These oral stories would have been deeply evocative of the land. In their written format alone, the tales, according to von Sydow, would become merely “lifeless extracts” (Sydow, 1934). This suggests that these stories need to be accompanied with deeply evocative language of the place in which they are set. Alternatively, in the modern day we can do, with the use of multimedia.

Twisted and Weathered Oak
Bodmin Moor

“periphery phenomena”
where far-flung
locations develop
unique oral traditions
due to their isolation



The legends told by Droll Tellers are conversational in nature, creating a lively exchange with their audience. Children gathered around the fire eagerly ask where to find giants, while Christians seek guidance to sacred shrines and holy wells, such as those connected to St. Cuthbert. In response, the Droll Teller matches their excitement, often embellishing the tales, which only enhances the creative and dynamic role of the storyteller. Edward Relph emphasises the concept of place as a deeply personal and communal connection to a location, shaped by the lived experiences and cultural practices tied to it (Relph, 1952 p10-14). The Droll Tellers exemplify this idea, as their stories are intrinsically connected to Cornwall's coasts, woodlands, and moors. By embedding their tales with motifs drawn from these shared landscapes, the Tellers anchor their narratives to specific places, enhancing the audience's sense of belonging and cultural identity. Their storytelling transforms these natural features; standing stones, ancient trees, cliffs, and caves, into living symbols of Cornish heritage, fostering an authentic sense of place. It could be argued by Relph that the Droll tellers of Cornwall have strengthened the emotional and symbolic ties people have to their environment, deepening their sense of place. The Droll Tellers' tales transform Cornwall's landscapes into storied spaces, which invites us to rethink the places we visit and how we described and understand them to others. Through their tales, the Droll Tellers not only preserve the essence of Cornwall's cultural identity but also breathes new life into its landscapes, ensuring they remain vibrant and meaningful to those who encounter them.

St Cuthbert's Cave Entrance
Holywell Bay Beach

“
With the
celebration
of modern
storytelling,
perhaps Cornish
droll telling
need never write
its final chapter.

(James, 2022)



The Woods

I Begin this journey through myth and legends on the door steps of
my childhood home on a cold winter morning

Draynes Woodland & Golitha Falls

50.493585, -4.499950









The woodlands of Cornwall are rich with stories; some shared, others uniquely their own, which is why we find ourselves in Draynes Woodland, a place steeped in legends of fallen kings, heroic deeds, forest deities, villains, and even the Devil himself. At its heart lies the dramatic and cascading Golitha Falls, a site that captures the imagination with its ancient mystique. Local lore tells of the Old Man of the Woods, ‘Golitha,’ said to appear under the glow of a full moon, a guardian of this ancient place. The name “Golitha,” derived from an old Cornish word meaning “obstruction,” adds to the enigmatic charm of this magical place (Seymour, 2024).

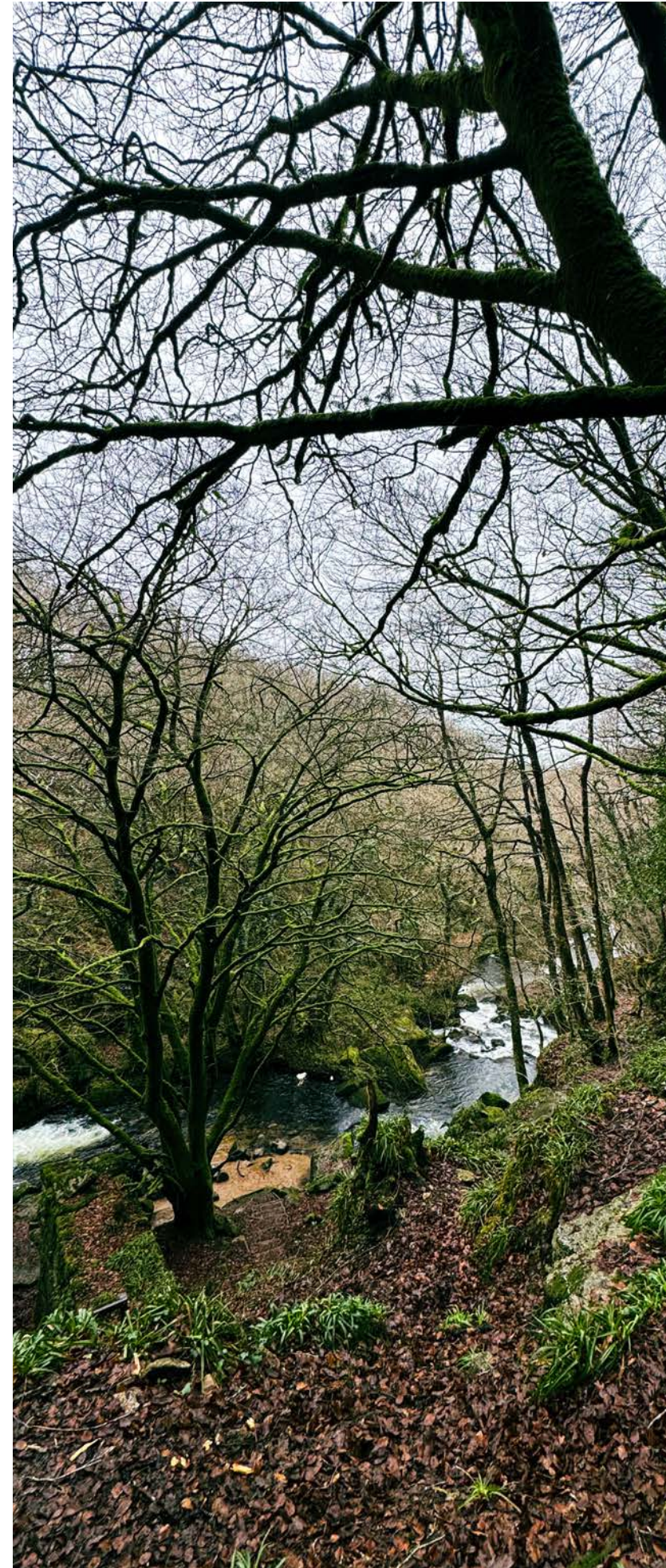


Golitha Falls Draynes Woodland



These woods lie on the edge of the moorland, bordered by a range of enchanting forests brimming with drolls - if you know where to look. Once you step into these woods, you quickly leave behind all signs of modern life, apart from the faint traces of others who have walked before you. The landscape soon engulfs you in its mystical embrace, with twisted trees covered in thick layers of moss whose roots are said to shelter fairies. Forgotten mine shafts, reclaimed by nature, whisper tales of the knockers, mining spirits that took the form of diminutive old men, who once warned miners of impending doom (James, 2022, Chapter 10). Draynes Woodland, with its rich tapestry of myth and natural beauty, invites visitors to immerse themselves in the wonder of Cornwall’s storied past. Deep in the woodland there is an eerie calm silence, a feeling similar to as if you have just walked in on someone’s conversation, the only sounds to be heard are the creaking of the older taller trees as the wind overhead moves their outermost arms. To imagine you are on a lone wander through these woodlands, your mind starts racing to what magic you have disturbed. Mark Fisher’s concept of the eerie, from *The Weird and the Zerie* (Fisher, 2017), captures this unsettling stillness. The eerie arises from a failure of presence or absence, something missing that should be there or present that should not be (Fisher, 2017 chapter 9). Here, the silence feels unnatural, as if something has just departed or is unseen, watching. The creaking trees suggest a hidden agency, inviting speculation and story. Fisher argues that such moments; whether in ruins, abandoned places, or deep woodlands, provoke a sense of mystery, reminding us that not all forces shaping the world are visible (IBID).

“
**Forgotten
mine shafts,
reclaimed by
nature, whisper
tales of the
knockers, mining
spirits that
took the form of
diminutive old
men**



Cornwall has a deeply woven relationship with legendary kings, stemming from its rich Celtic heritage and its rugged, mythical landscapes that inspire tales of heroism and mystery (Eheard & Seymour, 2024). The most iconic of these associations are with King Arthur, the legendary ruler of Camelot, who is often seen as a pillar of Cornish folklore, however there are many other kings that have stories of note, even in Draynes Wood and Golitha Falls. Elisabeth Dale, from a *Cornish bîrd blôg*, a website intended to bring together the lesser-known stories of Cornish history, has shared the story of King Doniert, one of Cornwall’s last true kings. Ruling during a time of turmoil, he carried the burdens of a kingdom caught between the Saxons and the encroaching tide of Viking raids. In 875 AD, his reign ended mysteriously near the roaring Golitha Falls. Found lifeless in the River Fowey, the nature of his death remains shrouded in uncertainty (Dale, King Doniert’s stone 2020) was it a tragic accident or a sinister act of betrayal?

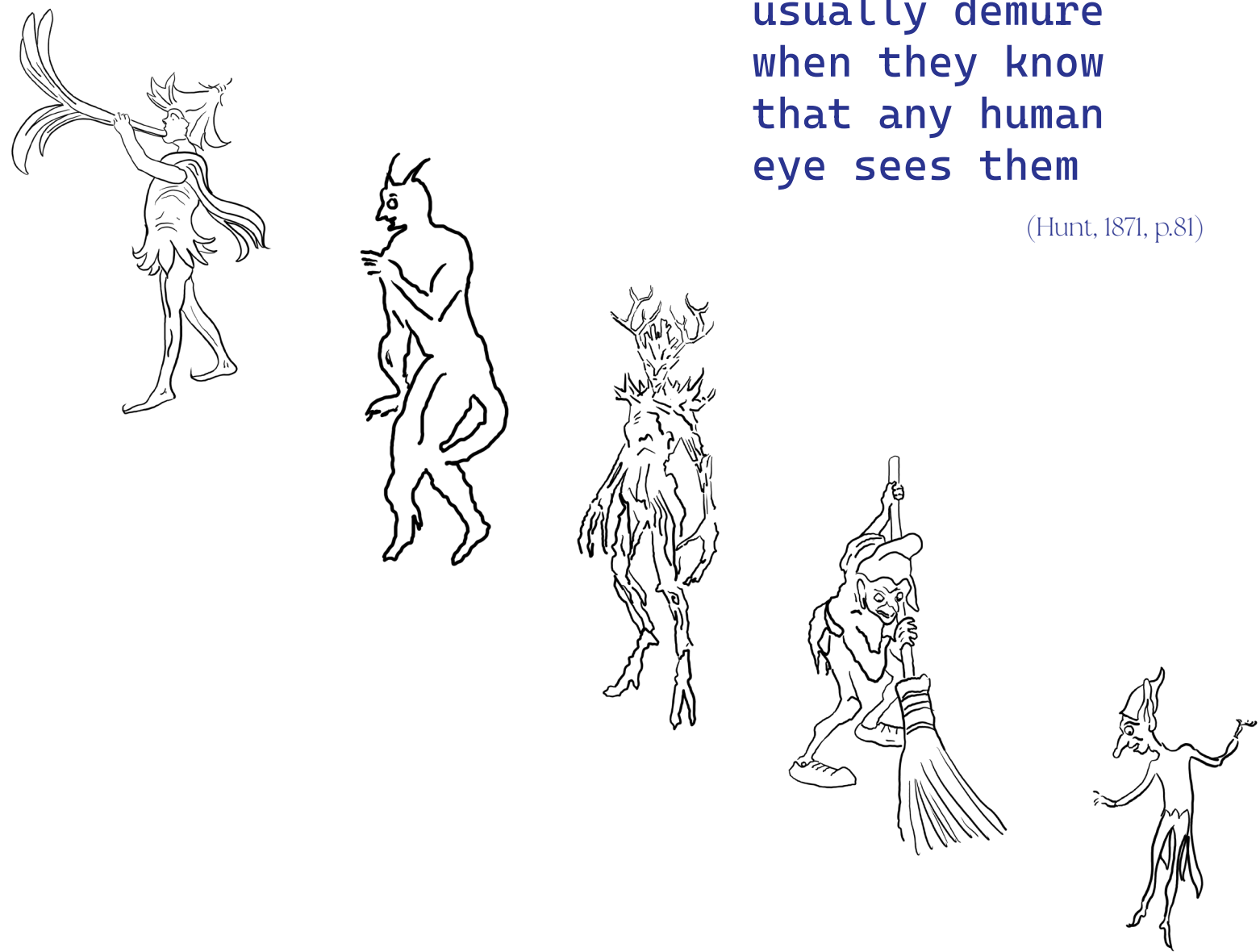
In his memory, two granite crosses were raised on Bodmin Moor, one inscribed with the Cornish words ‘Doniert rogavit pro anima’ which means “Doniert has asked for this to be made for his soul’s sake.”. Over the centuries, the king was nearly forgotten, but the stones endured. By the time writer C. Lewis Hind visited in 1906, locals no longer knew their significance. Hind reflected, “This king, so many centuries ago, has left a message. He entreats you to pray for his soul.” (Dale, King Doniert’s stone, 2020) Caught between history and legend, Doniert’s fate remains a mystery, but his legacy endures in the granite monuments and whispers of Cornwall’s ancient sovereignty.

The story of Doniert reflects how a sense of place is vital to identity yet easily disrupted. His tragic fate, tied to Golitha Falls, transforms the landscape into a cornerstone of cultural memory. Through retelling his tale, droll tellers reinforced the interdependence of stories and places, each needs the other to remain relevant and visceral; otherwise, both risk fading into obscurity. More than just a historical account, Doniert’s story becomes a touchstone for identity, a reminder that even in loss, meaning can be found in the land itself through the memory of a Cornish leader. However, the Death evokes Fishers notion of the ‘eerie’ (Fisher, 2017); the uncertainty surrounding Doniert’s death and the lingering presence of his stone monuments create an unsettling atmosphere. This ambiguity blurs the lines between history, myth, and landscape, suggesting that human legacies are not solely preserved by people but by the non-human world that endures beyond them.

The Tale of King Doniert
Link to film on YouTube

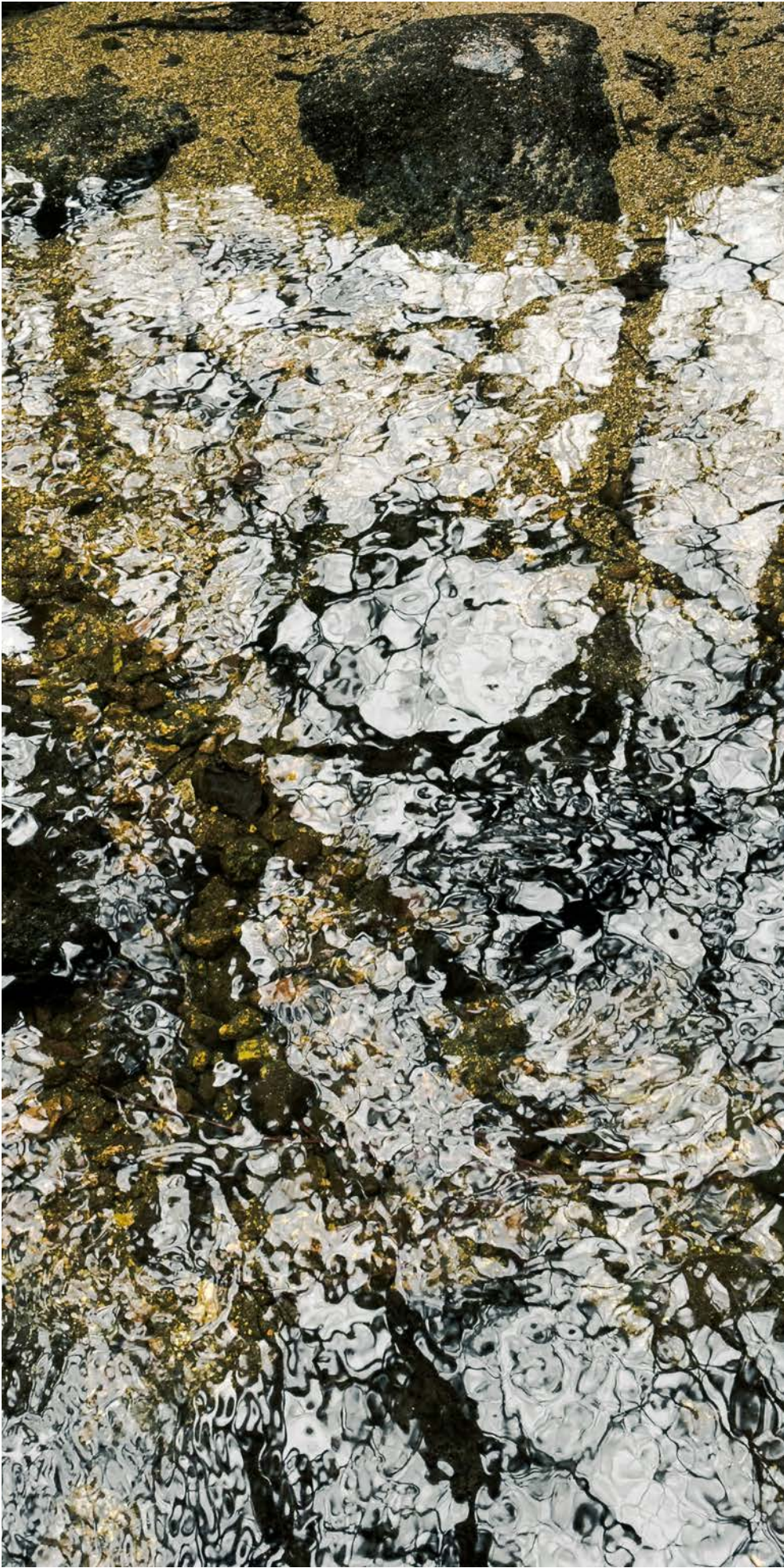


Many tales that emerge from Cornish woodlands are focused on the Fae Folk, deities of the Cornish landscape which Hunt puts into 5 categories: small people, spriggans, buccas, browneys, and of course piskies (Hunt, 1871, p.80). He notes that the first mentions of fae date back to 1210, describing them as tiny beings akin to Scandinavian elves (IBID p.81). These early fae folk were believed to tend to gardens of immense beauty, hidden just beyond the reach of mankind. Hunt suggests they were seen as the souls of ancient, long-forgotten people of Cornwall, a belief rooted in the old Celtic and pagan traditions, which echoed the modern Christian notion of ascending to heaven (IBID p.81). In places like Draynes woodland it's not hard to feel that you could be walking within the threshold to the land of the Fae Folk. This is especially at dawn and dusk, when the veil between night and day is thinnest as the first rays of sunlight race across the landscape, casting fleeting shadows even from the smallest natural elements.



“
These Small
People are
exceedingly
playful
amongst
themselves,
but they are
usually demure
when they know
that any human
eye sees them

(Hunt, 1871, p.81)



Cornish woodlands evoke a romantic sense of wonder, particularly when nature reclaims old ruins, an especially common sight due to Cornwall's age and mining heritage (Clive Fitch, no date). Anna Jorgensen and Marian Tylecote explore this phenomenon in *Ambivalent Landscapes-Wilderness in the Urban Interstices* (Jorgensen & Tylecote, 2007), where they define “post-modern wilderness” as areas once exploited by humans but now abandoned, allowing nature to take over. They argue that ruins reclaimed by nature, like those found in Cornwall's woodlands (and on its moors and coast), serve as a powerful reminder that nature is not a passive backdrop but an active force, capable of reshaping the world. In the eerie calm of Draynes Wood, the power of nature invites reflection on the fragile and fleeting presence of humanity in the landscape. Such realisations often evoke awe, terror, and melancholy, merging into an overwhelming experience of the sublime as described by Edmund Burke (Burke, 2009), a topic explored further in the later chapters. This sense of the sublime is not about beauty but rather a feeling that challenges rational thought. Historically, such emotions have inspired folklore, like the stories once told by Cornish droll tellers. As Dee Dee Chainey notes in *A Treasury of British Folklore: Maypoles, Mandrakes & Mistletoe* (Chainey & McLaren, 2018), ruins are believed to be home to malevolent ‘Spriggans’, small, grissled old men known for causing mayhem, thieving, and disturbing livestock (Chainey & McLaren, 2018, p.80). Fortunately, not all Cornish fae are hostile. Piskies, Cornwall's version of pixies, are said to be helpful; assisting with household chores but disappearing forever if paid for their work.

The presence of the fae is deeply intertwined with the wonder and mystery of Cornwall's landscapes. Twisted roots, moss-covered stone overhangs, and mysterious mushroom rings are all said to be connected to the Fae folk, be it their homes or the places where they dance under the moonlight (Chainey & McLaren, 2018, p.81). These tales layer the natural world with meaning, generated through complex emotional responses of awe and wonder, and sometimes terror (Jorgensen & Tylecote, 2007). Today, these stories risk being reduced to quaint curiosities, stripped of their deeper cultural significance.

Learning about Cornish droll tellers and seeking out these hidden tales within the landscape can reawaken the Cornish spirit. This resonates with Juhani Pallasmaa's insight: "We are in constant dialogue and interaction with our environment, to the degree that it is impossible to detach the image of self from its spatial and situational existence." (*The Eyes of the Skin*, 2012). These stories invite us to reflect on the spaces we inhabit, shaping how we perceive the world. Perhaps this interplay between self and space explains why we associate fairies with fleeting, half-forgotten human memories. As we project our own image onto the land, we imbue it with mystery and magic, giving rise to the fae; mythical beings who echo the wild, untamed, and enigmatic nature of Cornwall itself.

“When walking in the woods its best to not pick the blackberries after October... for the devil might have weed on them...

(Chainey & McLaren, 2018, p42)

Small Stream With Fae Homes
Draynes Woodland















The Coast

‘From Padstow Point to Lundy Light, is a watery grave by day and night’

Traditional sailors’ rhyme
(Walsh et al., 2010).

The Doom Bar & Holywell Beach

50.545089, -4.926140
50.390620, -5.145856





Sea Mist
Holywell Bay Beach

Cornwall's coastline is one of its greatest treasures, drawing millions of visitors each summer to its golden beaches. Tourists bask in the sunshine, ride the waves, and savour local delights like pasties and ice cream (Cornwall DMC, 2024). Yet, for all its beauty, Cornwall's coast is far more than a holiday destination. It is a place of raw, untamed power, an edge of the world environment where nature commands respect. Beneath the surface of its tranquil vistas lies a history of peril and mystery, etched into the rocks, where the land ends and the waves begin.

The North Coast of Cornwall faces the relentless power of the Atlantic Ocean. Its fierce rip currents can pull unsuspecting swimmers far from shore, while towering waves carve dramatic zawns; deep fissures in the cliffs that create hidden beaches (Tyler, 2015, p.11). Some of these rugged cliffscapes are so striking they have inspired legends of smugglers, giants, mermaids, and many other creatures that haunt the deep (Hunt, 1871, p.76). The sea has shaped life here for centuries, with sailors and fishermen recounting tales of its treacherous waters since the first Celts arrived on this granite peninsula. As historian Philip Payton notes, "you are never far from the sea in Cornwall," a truth reflected in the region's history, identity, and character (Payton, 2000). This connection is deeply personal to me. I grew up on this coastline, eating freshly caught seafood on Padstow's harbourside looking for old smuggling holes, swimming in the turquoise waters on summer evenings with the echo always in the back of my head "watch for rip currents", and listening to my granddad's chilling tales of shipwrecks on the infamous Doom Bar of the Camel Estuary.



“You are never far from the sea in Cornwall

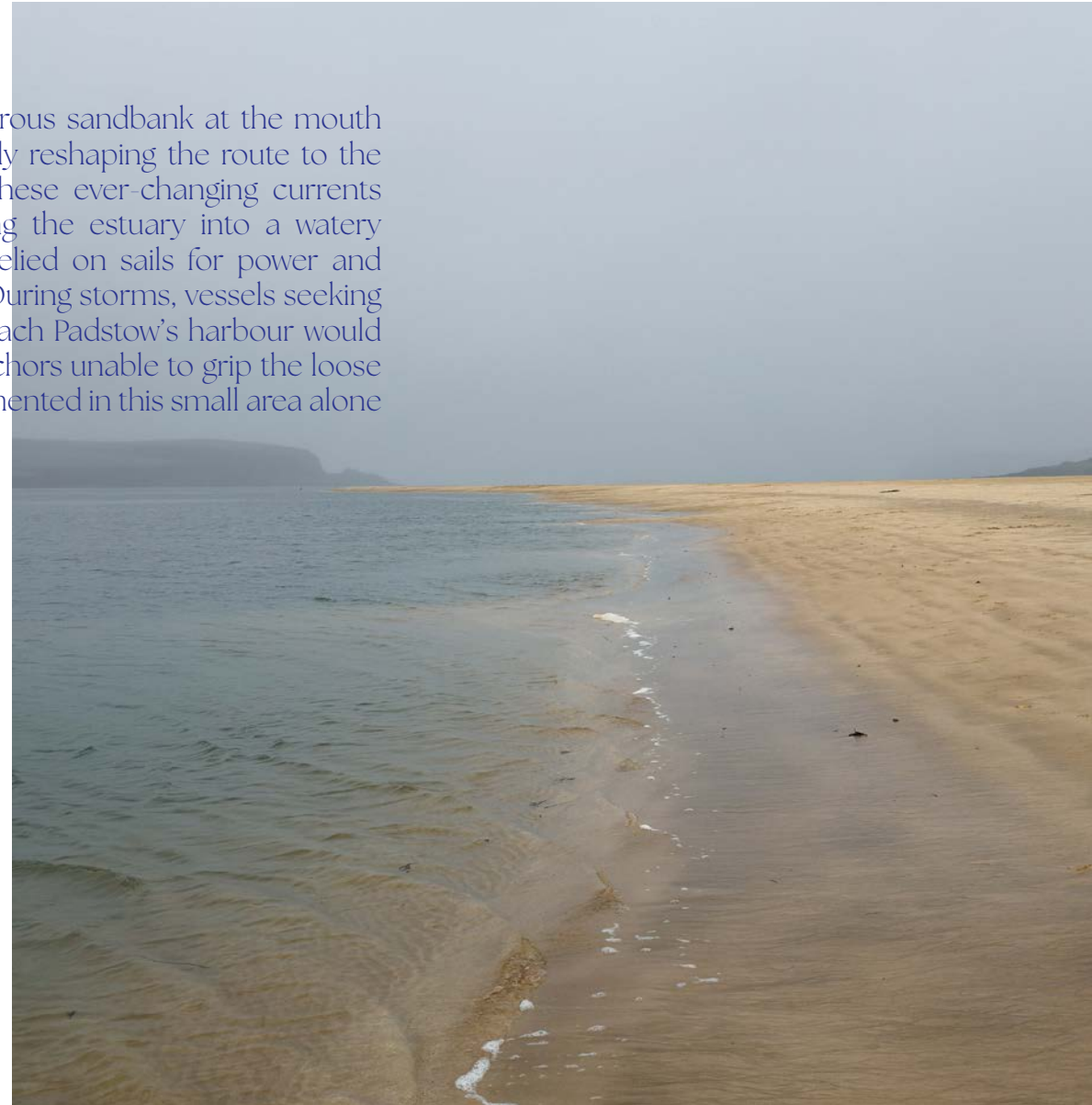
(Payton, 2000)

The Doom Bar (Photographed here) is a treacherous sandbank at the mouth of the Camel Estuary, its shifting sands constantly reshaping the route to the harbour. Concealed just beneath the surface, these ever-changing currents create an unpredictable and deadly trap, turning the estuary into a watery graveyard for unwary sailors. Historically, ships relied on sails for power and direction, leaving them at the mercy of the wind. During storms, vessels seeking refuge behind Stepper Point and attempting to reach Padstow’s harbour would often drift helplessly onto the Doom Bar, their anchors unable to grip the loose sand. More than 600 shipwrecks have been documented in this small area alone (Walsh et al., 2010).

“From Padstow Point to Lundy Light, is a watery grave by day and night

(Walsh et al., 2010).

The Doombar
Camel Estuary



At low tide, we are briefly reminded of this; Old wooden shipwrecks can be seen slowly decaying, evoking feelings of dread for the sailors that once did battle with the overwhelming force of nature. Edmund Burke, an 18th century philosopher, describes this feeling as the ‘Sublime’ in *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (Burke, 2009). Burke’s concept of the sublime, which coincided with the Romantic period, emphasised nature’s capacity to inspire both admiration and dread. This aesthetic movement, which sought to capture the raw power of the natural world, aligns with Robert Hunt’s *Popular Romances of the West of England* (1881), a collection of Cornish folklore that probably steered into this concept, especially when recounting tales of the sea. Christine Riding discusses the notion of the Romantic period embracing the Sublime outlined by Burke, in an article for the Tate, she suggests that capturing the sublime was a ‘spectator sport’ where people could embrace the sublime through art and literature such as Hunts work (Riding, 2013). This connection suggests that either Hunt or the Droll Tellers would use ‘pain’, ‘anguish’, ‘torment’ and ‘death’ like the feelings felt when confronted with shipwrecks to engage the listeners or readers more. These wrecks remind us of human fragility against the ocean’s might, embodying the ‘eerie’ absence Mark Fisher describes, where past human struggles linger as haunting relics (Fisher, 2017). The shipwrecks are not just remnants of human tragedy acted upon by the marine ecosystem, much like the ruins of the woods, the shipwrecks are slowly rotting away and becoming part of the Doombar. Shipwrecks and their stories highlight the limits of human dominance, reinforcing the idea that the ocean is not a passive backdrop but a powerful force indifferent to human ambition. Over time, these wrecks have inspired folk tales and old rhymes, such as the story of the mermaid of Padstow; Long ago, as she played upon the waves, a drunk sailor fired upon her. Wounded but vengeful, she rose from the water and swore the harbour would never thrive again. No commission nor engineer, the old folk say, can lift her spell or keep the sands at bay (Hunt, 1881). These tales not only serve as warnings of the sea’s dangers but also reflect an enduring cultural memory, where the line between history and myth blurs, keeping the past alive through storytelling and song.

The Doombar Tale

Link to film on YouTube



What lies beneath Cornwall’s waves has fascinated people for centuries, inspiring the enduring legend of Lyonesse. This mythical city, said to be filled with untold riches and knowledge, was the jewel of Cornwall, and represented the pinnacle of its glory (Hunt, 1881 p.189). According to legend, Lyonesse was lost beneath the ocean during a massive storm, a divine punishment for the sins of its inhabitants. The fabled city is believed to lie off Cornwall’s southern tip, between Land’s End and the Isles of Scilly, its origins intertwined with the tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Lyonesse first appeared in written form in Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* (1485), a collection of stories chronicling the exploits of King Arthur and his legendary knights (Spalding, 2023). The dangers of the sea, particularly for those who rely on it for their livelihood, lend credibility to these legends. Stories of freak waves and powerful storms, shared by fishermen and sailors, create a vivid context for the myth of Lyonesse, and those that live on the coast know how the sea is forever consuming the land. Edward Relph’s concept of “perceptual space” explains this phenomenon within communities. Relph describes how shared stories form a common imaginative ground for those who tell and hear them, even if the events that inspired these tales are only partially experienced. As Relph writes: “Although they are personal, perceptual spaces and places are not entirely isolated within the individual, for there are many common landscapes that are experienced.” (Relph, 1976, p11). Through this lens, the legend of Lyonesse represents more than a mythical city; it embodies the collective imagination of a people shaped by their deep connection to the powerful and unpredictable sea.

Many have looked for evidence of this mythical land, to no avail.

“Ask local fishermen, and they may tell you of the bells they can sometimes still hear, ringing softly from the fathoms below their boats

(Spalding, 2023).



Down the coast from the Doom Bar lies the picturesque beach of Holywell Bay, a seemingly ordinary stretch of soft, golden sand. However, this unassuming beach holds a secret. Hidden within a cave at the far end of the bay is St. Cuthbert's Well; a naturally forming spring tucked deep within the cliffs. This sea cave, shaped over millions of years by the relentless waves, is a place of wonder. The walls are adorned with vivid, otherworldly colours created by minerals seeping from the rock, while the ceiling is draped with stalactites that glisten in the dim light. The enchanting surroundings lend the cave an air of mysticism, making it feel like a spiritual place steeped in ancient origins. The origins of this well are hard to track, besides a few online blogs who don't name their sources, so like many of the drolls of old Cornwall this story could be inflated. In 995AD, monks fleeing Viking raiders carried St. Cuthbert's relics south, aiming for Ireland, but were blown off course to Cornwall. Stranded at Gull Rock near Holywell Bay, they hid the saint's bones in a cave. When they returned, a freshwater pool had miraculously appeared, which they believed was summoned by St. Cuthbert to sustain them. Drinking from it restored their strength, and news of its healing powers spread (The 2 holy wells of Holywell Bay, 2016). The well became a revered site, Hunt and other authors had heard of its healing powers, particularly for mothers seeking cures for their sick children (Hope, 2000, p.34).

The meeting of land and sea is central to Cornish identity, mirroring the resilience and fluidity of those who live here. Philosopher Eric Dardel, in his exploration of space and place, argues that our experience of the world is deeply tied to the landscapes we inhabit. In *L'Homme et la Terre* (1952), he describes how space is not just a physical expanse but a lived experience where "shadows, reflections, haze, and mist blend our feelings with the fantasies of the world," dissolving the boundary between reality and imagination. This aligns with Edmund Burke's notion of the sublime, where vast, untamed forces - like the restless ocean - evoke both awe and terror. Just as a ship fades into the mist, leaving only a haunting absence, the shifting tides and jagged cliffs of Cornwall create a space where myth and memory intertwine, shaping both landscape and identity.

“ shadows,
reflections, haze,
and mist blend our
feelings with the
fantasies of the
world

(Dardel, 1952)

Cave Wall
Holywell Bay Beach

























The Moors

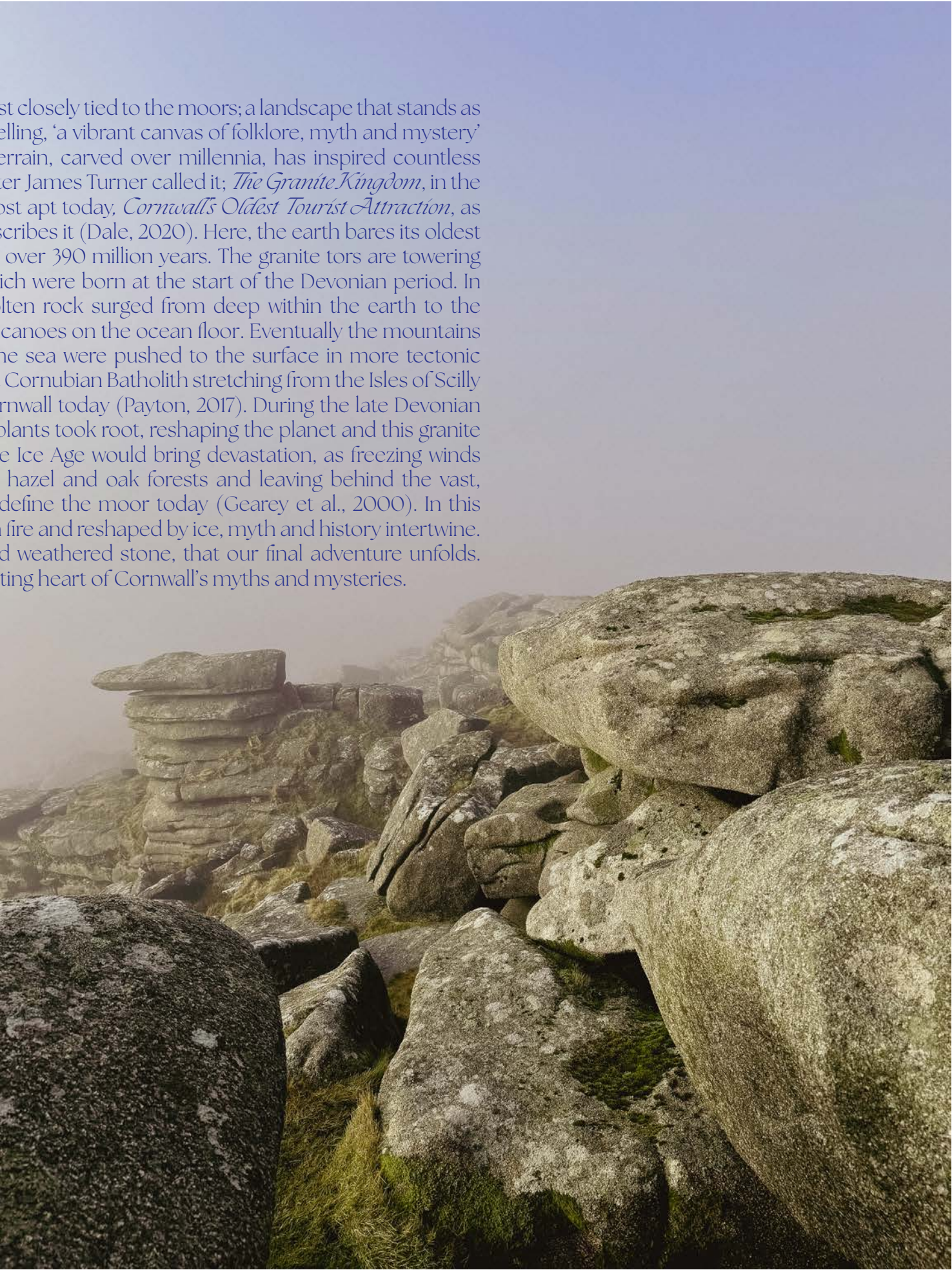
In this epic, elemental landscape, forged in fire and reshaped by ice, myth and history collide.

Minions & Rough Tor

50.526013, -4.459154
50.597168, -4.621791



The Droll tellers of Cornwall are most closely tied to the moors; a landscape that stands as the very essence of Cornish storytelling, ‘a vibrant canvas of folklore, myth and mystery’ (Weird Walk, 2023). This ancient terrain, carved over millennia, has inspired countless names: *The Stone Peninsula*, as writer James Turner called it; *The Granite Kingdom*, in the words of poet D.M. Thomas; or, most apt today, *Cornwall’s Oldest Tourist Attraction*, as modern blogger Elisabeth Dale describes it (Dale, 2020). Here, the earth bares its oldest secrets, etched into the landscape over 390 million years. The granite tors are towering remnants of a prehistoric past, which were born at the start of the Devonian period. In a violent continental collision, molten rock surged from deep within the earth to the surface forming mountains and volcanoes on the ocean floor. Eventually the mountains and volcanoes at the bottom of the sea were pushed to the surface in more tectonic upheaval becoming part of the vast Cornubian Batholith stretching from the Isles of Scilly to Dartmoor, what we know as Cornwall today (Payton, 2017). During the late Devonian period, life flourished as trees and plants took root, reshaping the planet and this granite region forever (Scott, 1984). But the Ice Age would bring devastation, as freezing winds swept across the land, wiping out hazel and oak forests and leaving behind the vast, peat-covered granite shelves that define the moor today (Gearey et al., 2000). In this raw, elemental landscape, forged in fire and reshaped by ice, myth and history intertwine. It is here, amid the rolling mist and weathered stone, that our final adventure unfolds. Welcome to Bodmin Moor, the beating heart of Cornwall’s myths and mysteries.



The first of two sites documented here are located on the east side of Bodmin moor not too far from the Draynes Woodland, the encompassing area of the moorland here is called Minions. Just like the woodland, all traces of modernity soon disappear as you venture onto the moorland. Shortly into my walk, I saw figures in the distance start to move in the thick morning mist, the silhouettes only made more prominent by the sun trying to pierce through. As I move through the mist closer to these stoic figures they transform into standing stones, like the mist had bewitched the hikers before me. In this moment I really understood how a droll teller roaming the countryside looking for his next bed would have felt, a rational mind overwhelmed by the senses evoked here. Unlike myself many droll tellers likely travelled with a tankard of cyder, which would have only aided their creative vision, especially in a time before science and logic. In reality, these stone figures were the extraordinary line of three rings of Stone Circles known as the Hurlers. Their names come from the legend attached this prehistoric site, which is believed to be a 16th century folktale (Weird Walk, 2023) Legend whispers that The Hurlers were once men, defiant of the Sabbath, who chose their silver ball over sacred duty. As they played beneath a sullen sky, an old man emerged from the moor’s mist, warning them to repent. They laughed, tossing him the ball, only to hear his voice crack like thunder as he cursed them to stand forever as stone. When the storm passed, the moor was silent, the men stood frozen in place. Even now, on stormy nights, the wind carries echoes of their laughter and the ghostly clatter of a silver ball. (Hunt, 1871 p.178). This tale likely originates from the period when Cornwall transitioned from a Celtic pagan society to a Christian one. While its structure and supernatural elements reflect the belief that natural objects, phenomena, and the universe have souls in Celtic folklore as described Miranda Greens *The gods of the Celts* (Green, 2011 chapter 1), its moral lesson reinforces Christian doctrine, portraying divine punishment for Sabbath-breaking. The blending of pagan and Christian motifs suggests that such stories functioned as a means of reinforcing new religious traditions while still appealing to deeply rooted cultural beliefs. This syncretism is a recurring feature of British folklore, where pre-Christian deities and spirits were often reinterpreted as demons, saints, or cautionary figures (Davidson, 1989 p16-18).

The Hurlers Tale
[Link to film on YouTube](#)



Figures start to move in the thick morning mist, silhouettes only made more prominent by the sun trying to pierce through. As I move through the mist closer to these stoic figures they transform into standing stones





The Hurlers stone circles are far more than just the remnants of a tale carried through the Middle Ages and preserved in local legend. They are an ancient, sacred site of profound significance to the people who built them. As *Weird Walk* describes, the site is rich with purpose: its stones form intricate alignments, some serving as processional markers, others aligning with stars such as Vega and Arcturus. The triple arrangement of stone circles appears to have a deliberate solar alignment, showcasing the sophisticated understanding of celestial patterns by its Bronze Age creators (Weird Walk, 2023). These monuments stand as some of the earliest evidence of human activity in Cornwall, a testament to the enduring magic of the moors that still draws visitors today. Philip Payton refers to this era as “Pre-Celtic,” predating the Celtic identity that later defined the region. The Celts, associated with Cornish, Welsh, Breton, Irish, Scottish Gaelic, and Manx cultures, primarily emerged in the Iron Age, long after the Bronze Age builders of the Hurlers had left their mark (Payton, 2017). By the time the Celtic Dumnonian tribe settled in the area, these circles would have already been ancient, shrouded in mystery and myth. Even if the proto-Celts of the Bronze Age had a hand in their construction, it was in the Iron Age that Cornwall began to fully acquire its Celtic identity, with the Hurlers standing as a haunting reminder of the distant past and its enigmatic creators. Today the stones probably have just as much conjecture about their true origins as they did when Cornwall first acquired its Celtic Identity.

The moors are landscapes where oral traditions come alive, living spaces shaped by the stories passed through generations. From droll tellers to children, from children to their future families, and from friend to friend, these tales twist and turn like a path through the mist. One stumbles across strange formations that seem to hold echoes of old voices, giants and spectral figures shared in whispers by weary travellers, trading stories for cyder. Moving beyond the Hurlers, the moor reveals a pitted landscape marked by centuries of human activity. The Celts first sought tin and copper here, and later, during the Industrial Revolution, steam power reshaped the land with ease (Fitch, 2006). The mines, now abandoned, remain as ruins scattered across the desolate hills, where mist clings to forgotten paths and derelict engine houses loom like gravestones to an industry long gone (Caine, 2024).

Quarry Entrance
Stowes Hill, Bodmin Moor



Changing Mists
Bodmin Moor

As we pass these remnants of Cornwall’s mining past, Stowe’s Hill comes into view. Perched on the edge of an old quarry stands the Cheesewring; an imposing stack of granite boulders, balanced in a way that feels at odds with time and gravity. It crowns an ancient volcanic hill of granite, sculpted by millions of years of erosion (Payton, 2017). They predate us, outlast us, and seem to defy explanation, inviting folklore to account for their presence. Here, Burke’s sublime takes shape, not in an active, violent force, but in an unsettling vastness, where time and decay weigh heavily on the land. Mark Fisher’s eerie lingers in the silence, in the absence of those who once toiled here, in the way the landscape holds onto stories but never speaks them aloud. Even now, when the mist thickens and the wind rises, the land feels neither empty nor entirely inhabited, a place where something should be present, or where something lingers that should not.

For those who first heard tales of the Cheesewring from droll tellers and later encountered it themselves, the experience was more than a meeting with stone, it was an encounter with something that resisted explanation. The stacked rocks, looming against the shifting sky, seemed poised between balance and collapse, a precarious defiance of natural order. Folklore granted them movement, claiming that the uppermost stone would turn three times when a cockerel crowed. This tale, recorded by Hunt in 1871, captures the playful yet unsettling quality of Cornish storytelling, where the landscape itself appears animated, responsive to forces beyond human control (Hunt, 1871, p. 186).

Posthumanist thought, particularly Jane Bennett's notion of 'vibrant matter' (Bennett, 2010 Chapter 1), suggests that the Cheesewring is not merely a backdrop for human myths but an active participant in shaping them, something she calls 'ThingPower' which is also influenced by the observer's mindset. Its sheer presence commands attention, disrupting the idea that only living things exert agency (Bennett, 2010 Chapter 1). Mark Fisher's concept of the eerie (Fisher, 2017) deepens this perspective, the Cheesewring is strange not because of what it is, but because of what it suggests: a structure that should not exist, yet does, inviting speculation about unseen forces at play. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty & Smith, 1962) it is discussed that preexisting narratives can obscure our perception of space by imposing pre-conceived notions of objectivity and rationality. In our case, to stand before the Cheesewring is not to encounter a neutral object, but one charged with meaning because of its impressive creation story. Our perception of this place has been shaped by the story, making the stone stack feel less like a geological feature and more like an artefact of forgotten power (Merleau-Ponty & Smith, 1962, 284–286).

The legends from the moors, while whimsical on the surface, often speak to something greater: an awareness that the landscape is neither passive nor entirely knowable. Jean-François Lyotard's interpretation of the sublime (Lyotard, 1995) captures this well, where Burke's sublime (Burke, 2009) thrives on overwhelming power, for instance the ocean destroying massive ships, Lyotard's points to the failure of comprehension. When something resists being understood, the sublime is a specific kind of experience that is only possible when comprehension is impossible, where a rational mind would seek irrational explanations (Lyotard, 1995 p92-95). The Cheesewring, with its improbable form and layered mythologies, unsettles our sense of understanding of the known world. It is a structure that demands interpretation yet refuses to be fully explained. Even today, as mist folds over the moor, those who approach the Cheesewring might feel an unease, a pull toward the stories that preceded them. Perhaps the cockerel has long since fallen silent, but the legend lingers, unsettled as the stones themselves.

Preexisting

narratives

can obscure our

perception



The second story offers a more imaginative explanation for the Cheesewring's origins, drawing on the enduring motif of giants that has likely threaded through generations of oral tradition, from the Celts to the present day. Payton (2017, chapter 1) notes that people often turned to folklore to make sense of such striking geological formations, to the point that "imagery of ancient stones became an essential ingredient in representations of Cornwall." This particular legend, recorded by various collectors in the 19th century, embraces the sublime in both its narrative and setting; blending human awe, divine intervention, and the overwhelming scale of the landscape itself. The tale tells of Uther, a giant and proud lord of Bodmin Moor, who grew enraged when St. Tue, a wandering saint, raised a holy cross atop Stowe's Hill. In defiance, Uther challenged St. Tue to a test of strength, hurling vast boulders across the land. The saint, undeterred, sent his own stones soaring higher with whispered prayers, all coming to rest atop Stowe's Hill in perfect, divine balance, forming what we now know as the Cheesewring (Chapman, 2013). This legend likely originated during the age of the Cornish saints (500–700 AD), where St. Tue takes the role of the hero, symbolising the shift from ancient beliefs to Christian dominance. The tale served as a powerful oral motif, showcasing the saints' divine power and reinforcing their presence. By portraying the saints as champions capable of toppling giants and reshaping the land, it delivered a clear message: the saints were here to stay. These Drolls glorified the saints, intertwining their deeds with Cornwall's ancient stones, monuments older than the Celtic nation itself. This blending of faith and folklore made the transition to Christianity smoother, embedding the saints into the most impressive aspects of the landscape and the collective consciousness of the people.

The Cheeswring

Bodmin Moor

As Weird Walk notes, “There are several other powerful sites in this area,” most notably Trethevy Quoit; an enormous dolmen whose epic scale isn’t fully captured in pictures (Weird Walk, 2023). Believed to have once been encased in a loose stone mound, time has scattered its covering, leaving the structure exposed. In its Neolithic heyday, Trethevy Quoit would have been an incredibly sacred site, a place where the living bid farewell to the dead. Its classification as a “portal dolmen” reflects its purpose as a symbolic gateway to the afterlife, which explains the extraordinary effort expended to construct it (*How Did Neolithic People View Death and Burial?*, 2025). For those who stumbled across such sites before widespread knowledge of their origins, the sheer mystery and grandeur would have been bewildering. Hearing tales of their creation later would have only magnified the sense of wonder, embedding these places with personal narratives and collective memory. As Ülo Valk and Daniel Sävborg discuss in *Place-Lore, Liminal Storyworld and Ontology of the Supernatural*, folklore is often tied to specific places often carries a stratification of memories and stories. This is especially true in Cornwall, where the landscape and its tales are deeply interwoven with the social, economic, and spiritual realities of the people (Valk & Sävborg, 2018). For instance, the mining landscapes of Cornwall, once purely practical workplaces, have transitioned into sites of folkloric imagination, reflecting the struggles and aspirations of those who toiled there. In essence, Cornish folklore and droll telling demonstrate that places are far more than physical locations, they are cultural constructs, constantly shaped and reshaped by the stories told about them and the lives lived within them. This dynamic process keeps Cornish folklore vibrant, relevant, and deeply rooted in the land, ensuring that these stories endure across generations.

Trethevy Quoit
Bodmin Moor



South Phoenix Mine
Bodmin Moor



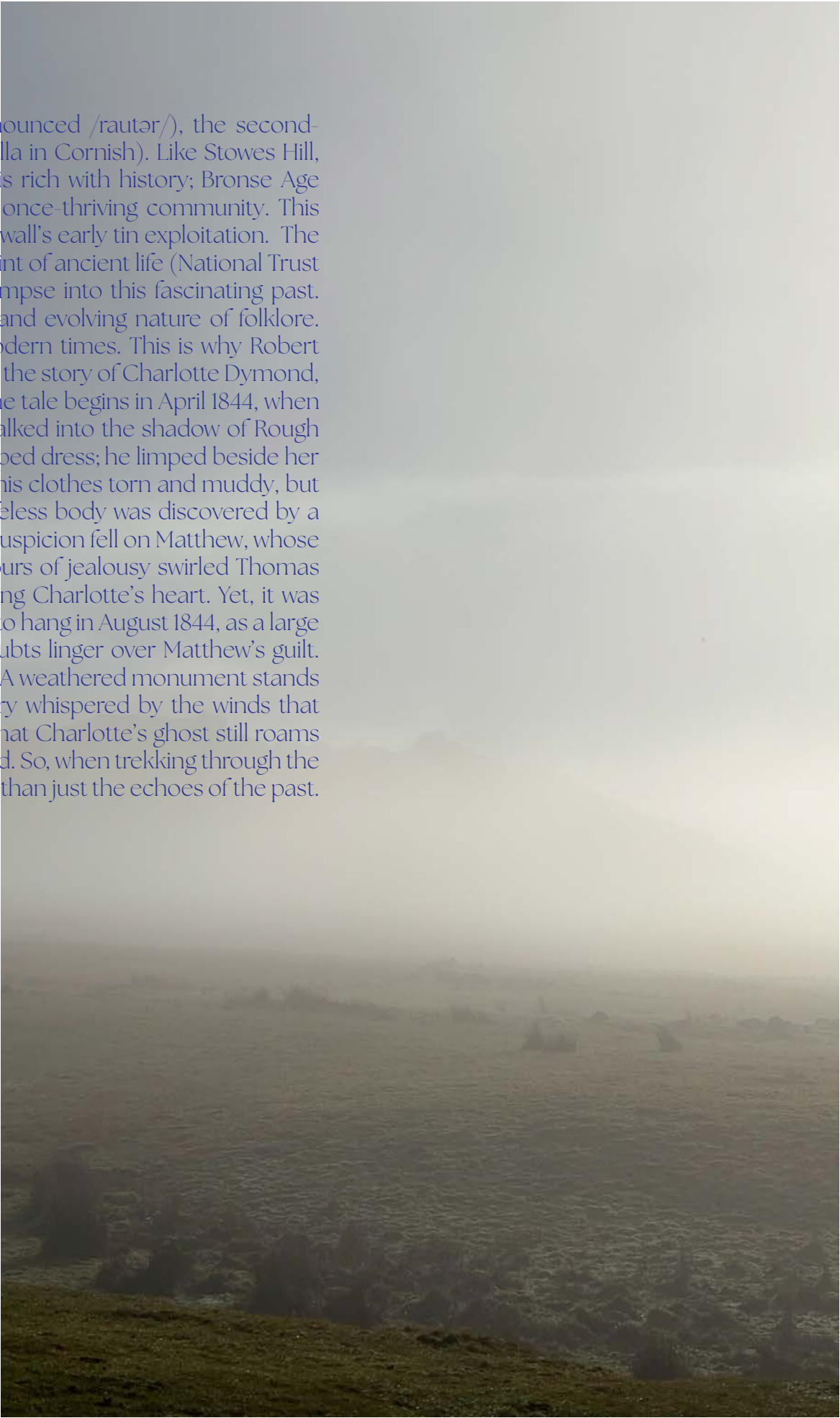




On the western side of the Moor lies Rough Tor (pronounced /rautər/), the second-highest point in Cornwall after Brown Willy (Bronn Ewhella in Cornish). Like Stowes Hill, Rough Tor is a striking granite extrusion. Its landscape is rich with history; Bronze Age fields, remnants of huts, cairns, and terracing hint at a once-thriving community. This was a place where people lived, worked, and began Cornwall’s early tin exploitation. The summit served as a tribal center and ritual site, a focal point of ancient life (National Trust Heritage Records Online). Exploring its ruins offers a glimpse into this fascinating past. Rough Tor also stands as a testament to the enduring and evolving nature of folklore. Drolls, or stories of place, continue to grow, even in modern times. This is why Robert Hunt, the famed collector of Cornish tales, did not record the story of Charlotte Dymond, it is a more recent addition to Cornwall’s oral tradition. The tale begins in April 1844, when Charlotte Dymond, a young servant at Penhale Farm, walked into the shadow of Rough Tor with her lover, Matthew Weeks. She wore a green-striped dress; he limped beside her in his Sunday best. By evening, Matthew returned alone, his clothes torn and muddy, but Charlotte was nowhere to be found. A week later, her lifeless body was discovered by a stream at Rough Tor, her throat slashed from ear to ear. Suspicion fell on Matthew, whose distinctive limp had been noticed near the scene. Rumours of jealousy swirled Thomas Prout, another admirer, who had once boasted of stealing Charlotte’s heart. Yet, it was Matthew who stood trial at Bodmin and was condemned to hang in August 1844, as a large crowd gathered to witness his execution. To this day, doubts linger over Matthew’s guilt. The moor, rugged and unforgiving, keeps its secrets well. A weathered monument stands at Rough Tor, inscribed in Charlotte’s memory, her story whispered by the winds that sweep the timeless landscape (Letcher, 2022). It is said that Charlotte’s ghost still roams the moor, perhaps because her true killer was never found. So, when trekking through the mist, keep your wits about you, you may encounter more than just the echoes of the past.

It is said that Charlotte’s ghost still roams the moor, perhaps because her true killer was never found

Rough Tor
Bodmin Moor



Charlotte Dymond Memorial

Rough Tor
Bodmin Moor

Path - - -

Settlement Ruins

Showery Tor

Terracing

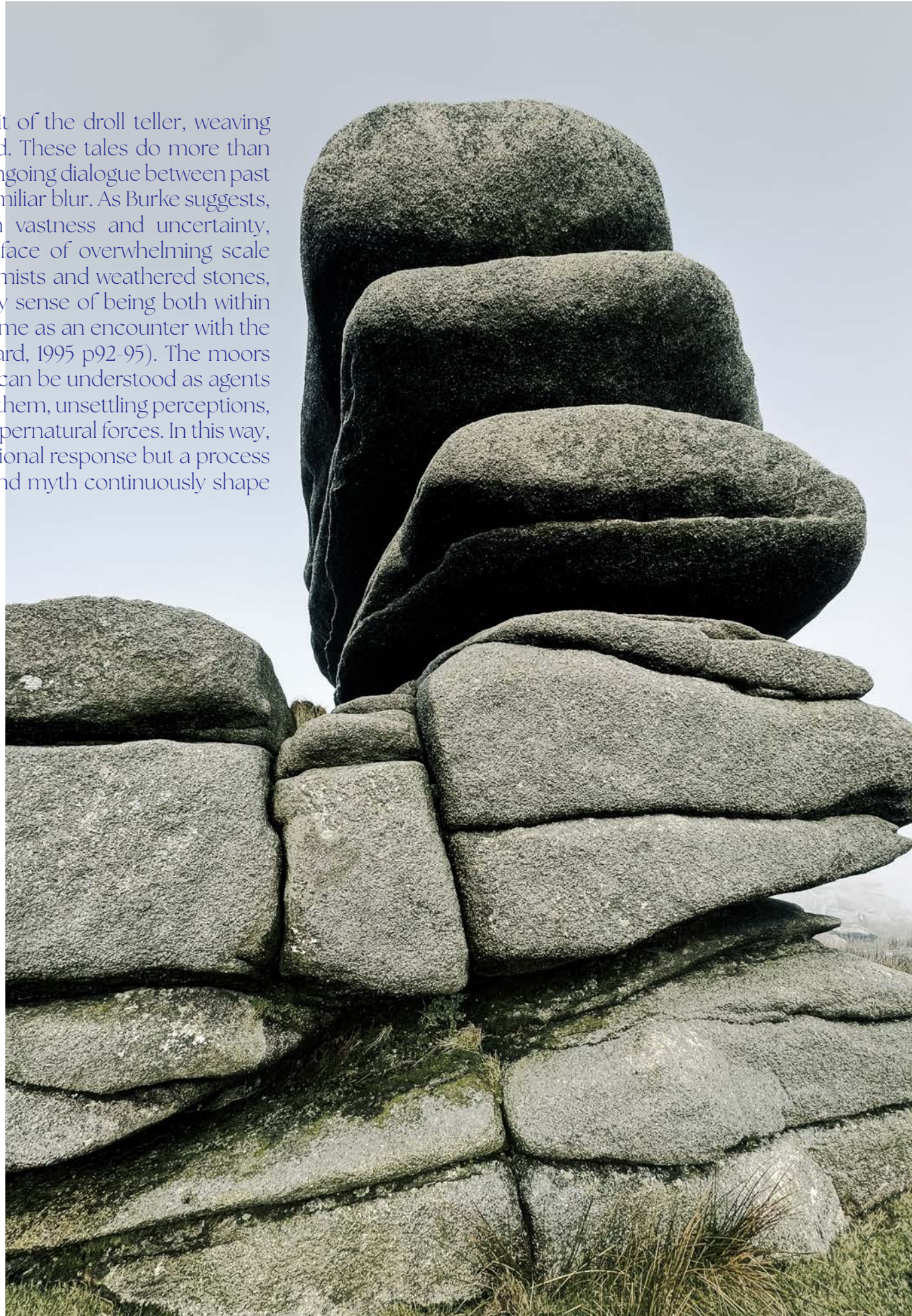
Dolmen

Rough Tor Summit

Ancient Fields

The folklore of the moors embodies the spirit of the droll teller, weaving a tapestry of stories that tether us to the land. These tales do more than explain the landscape, they immerse us in an ongoing dialogue between past and present, where the unknowable and the familiar blur. As Burke suggests, the sublime emerges from encounters with vastness and uncertainty, where human comprehension falters in the face of overwhelming scale (Burke, 2009). The moors, with their shifting mists and weathered stones, evoke this experience, amplifying the uncanny sense of being both within and beyond time. Lyotard's notion of the sublime as an encounter with the unrepresentable is equally resonant here (Lyotard, 1995 p92-95). The moors themselves, through their dramatic presence, can be understood as agents of storytelling, acting upon those who traverse them, unsettling perceptions, and inspiring narratives of giants, saints, and supernatural forces. In this way, the sublime is not simply an aesthetic or emotional response but a process of engagement, where landscape, memory, and myth continuously shape and reshape one another.

Rough Tor
Bodmin Moor









The Conclusion



a landscape
saturated with
emotional and
cultural depth,
incomprehensible
to those without
lived experience
of it

The sublime, as Burke describes, manifests in the vast, the untamed, and the overwhelming power of nature; elements that are fundamental to Cornwall’s landscape and folklore. The jagged cliffs where the Atlantic crashes, the mist-draped moors where ancient stones pierce the skyline, and the deep woods that whisper of lost kings all evoke a sense of awe and terror. It is within these liminal spaces that stories arise, where droll tellers do not merely entertain but serve as agents of the sublime, mediating between landscape, history, and the imagination. Their tales heighten the overwhelming sensation of nature’s grandeur, making the intangible both present and visceral.

Jean-François Lyotard’s conception of the sublime as an encounter with the unrepresentable; a moment where comprehension falters in the face of the ineffable, aligns with the effect of folklore on place. Cornwall’s folkloric tradition, embodied in the performances of droll tellers, transforms the land into an existential space, what Edward Relph describes as a landscape saturated with emotional and cultural depth, incomprehensible to those without lived experience of it. These spaces transcend mere physicality; they are shaped by memory, myth, and the passage of stories across generations (Relph, 1952). The droll tellers, by drawing upon these inherited narratives, does not merely tell a story, they animate the land itself, reinforcing its identity as a charged and storied place.

This process mirrors Carl Wilhelm von Sydow’s Ecotype Method, which emphasises the adaptation of tradition to its environment (Hasan-Rokem, 2016). In Cornwall, folklore has not remained static but has evolved in response to both the land and its people. As Ronald James notes, regions on the cultural periphery often generate unique oral traditions due to their isolation, escaping the homogenising forces found in centralised storytelling traditions as Cornwall did from the rest of England (James, 2022). The droll teller, operating within this dynamic, was not simply a vessel for transmitting tales but a force that shaped and reshaped them, ensuring they resonated with the emotional and physical reality of Cornwall’s sublime landscape. James highlights that while Cornish folklore shares elements with broader European traditions, it is in the telling that its uniqueness emerges. Cornwall’s oral tradition is imbued with the spirit of its place and people, with droll tellers leaving an indelible mark on the stories they carried.

The sublime is not only found in the scale of the natural world but in the act of storytelling itself. Through the cadence of a droll teller's voice, the rolling mist of Bodmin Moor becomes more than a weather pattern, it becomes a spectral threshold, charged with ancient energy. The standing stones that punctuate the horizon are not inert relics but the petrified remnants of men and women punished by nature. These narratives, ever-evolving, act as the connective tissue between past and present, between human experience and the unknowable depths of the land. As Anthropologist Keith Basso suggests in *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (1996), place is animated by thought, emotion, and memory, gathering and holding meaning over time (Basso, 1996). The landscape, in this sense, is both agent and archive, containing layers of accumulated lore, each one adding to its sublime presence.

Mark Fisher's notion of the eerie provides another lens through which to consider Cornwall's folkloric landscape. The eerie hinges on questions of agency - whether something unseen exerts influence, or whether traces of past forces linger in the present. In Cornwall, where abandoned tin mines dot the cliffs and ancient monuments stand as remnants of forgotten builders, the land itself exudes this eerie quality. The tales of droll tellers reinforce this sensation, keeping alive the notion that the land is not empty but occupied by spectral presences and unseen forces (Fisher, 2016) This becomes even more relevant when considering Merleau-Ponty's position on narratives, he believes that narratives structure how we describe and recall those experiences. Cornwall's folklore, operates as more than just storytelling, it becomes a means of shaping perception, blurring the line between memory and myth. Through the interplay of Fisher's eerie and Merleau-Ponty's understanding of narrative, the landscape emerges not as a passive backdrop but as an active force, imbued with lingering presences and unresolved agency

Modernity often positions folklore as an "imperfect lens through which to view a distant past" (James, 2022), yet this assumption overlooks its vital role in shaping a living cultural identity. Droll tellers were not simply preservers of tradition but active interpreters, ensuring folklore remained responsive to the world in which it was told. Their stories acted as both warnings and wonders, as moral lessons and playful distractions, but always as something more, an invocation of the sublime, an assertion that the land itself is alive with meaning, and that, for those who listen, it still speaks.

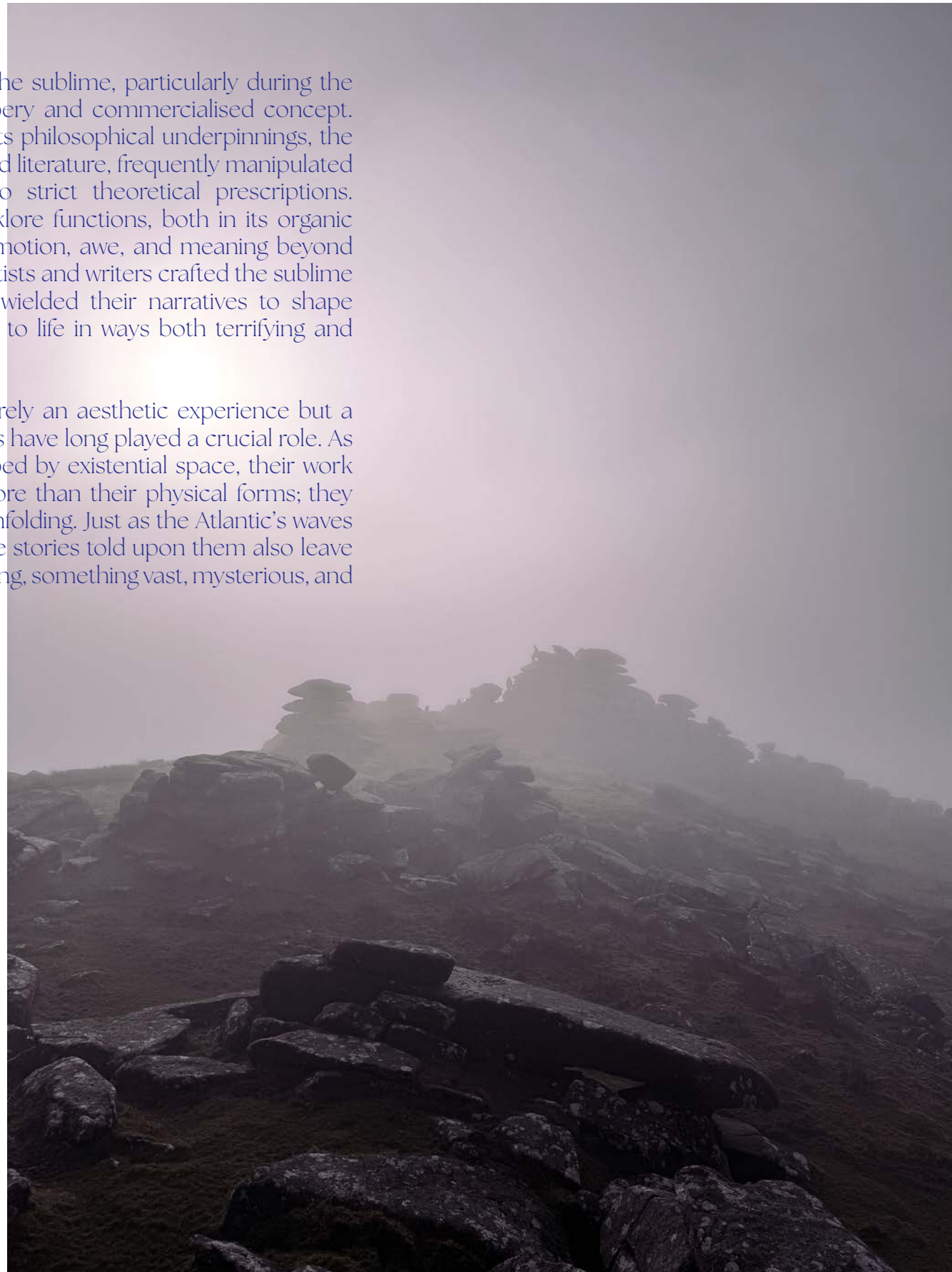
Rough Tor
Bodmin Moor



Christine Riding underscores how the sublime, particularly during the Romantic period, was often a slippery and commercialised concept. While Burke, and Lyotard debated its philosophical underpinnings, the term became a “buzzword” in art and literature, frequently manipulated for effect rather than adhering to strict theoretical prescriptions. This ambiguity mirrors the way folklore functions, both in its organic evolution and its ability to evoke emotion, awe, and meaning beyond rigid definitions. Just as Romantic artists and writers crafted the sublime to provoke response, droll tellers wielded their narratives to shape perception, to bring the landscape to life in ways both terrifying and wondrous.

In Cornwall, the sublime is not merely an aesthetic experience but a lived reality, one in which droll tellers have long played a crucial role. As custodians of an oral tradition shaped by existential space, their work reminds us that landscapes are more than their physical forms; they are storied, sacred, and endlessly unfolding. Just as the Atlantic’s waves reshape the cliffs over centuries, the stories told upon them also leave behind something altered yet enduring, something vast, mysterious, and ultimately sublime.

Rough Tor
Bodmin Moor



Collection of Spoken Drolls
Playlist published on YouTube

All these Films Have been written and produced by the Author of this thesis, William Martyn. Inspired by various sources, and intended to capture the essence of The Droll Tellers

So, as you wander Cornwall’s cliffs and valleys, let stories spill from your tongue; old ones, new ones, ones spun from the sea mist itself – because who knows? In a hundred years, someone might just be reading them on a blog, inspiring them to explore these landscapes.

– Will

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY STATEMENT

For

CORNWALL

WHERE THE LAND SPEAKS

THE WOODS THE COAST THE MOORS

ARCT 1060 ARCHITECTURAL THESIS
WILLIAM MARTYN

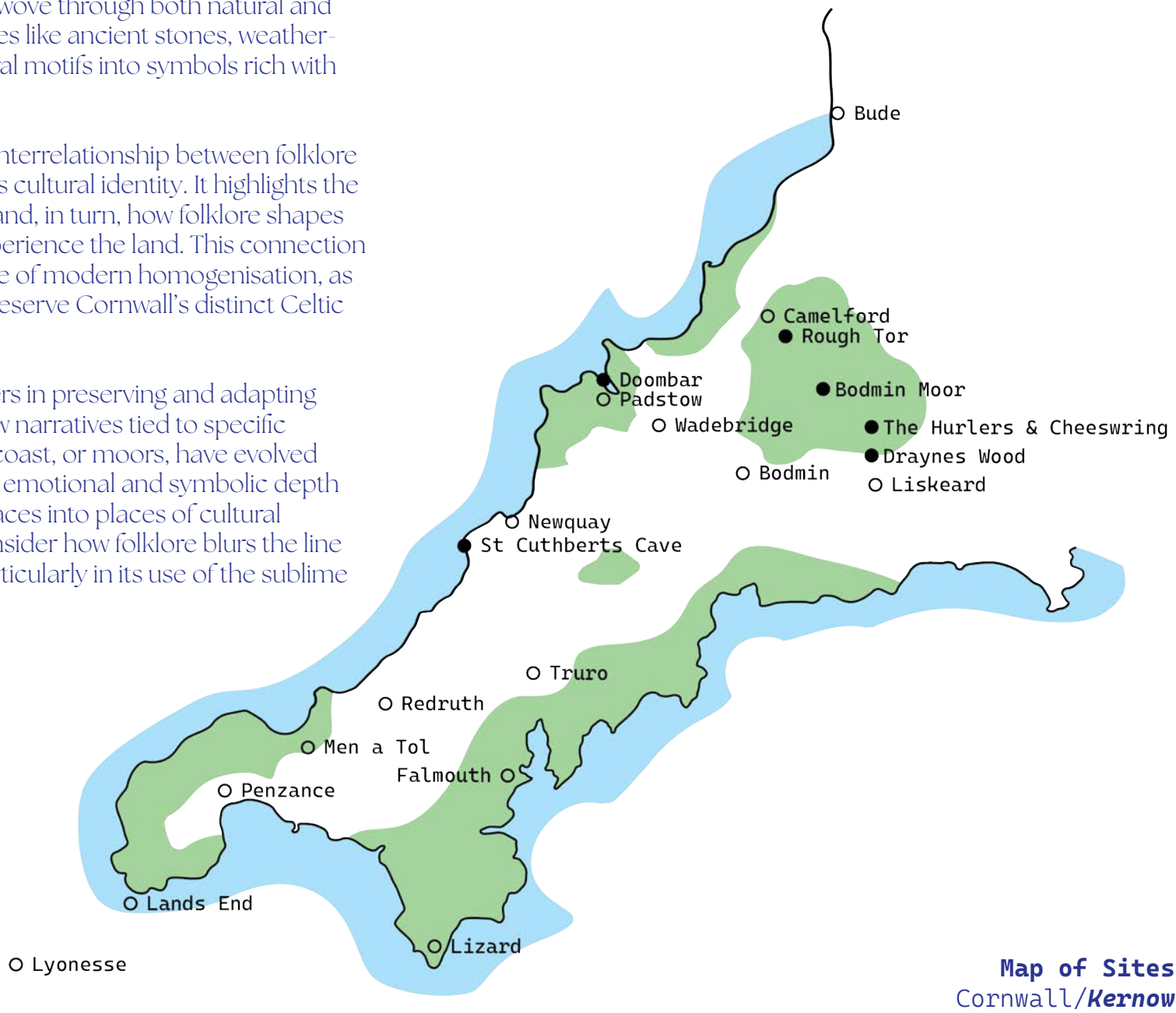
Research Focus

The focus of my thesis is to explore the deep relationship between the Cornish landscape and its folklore, particularly how the land itself seems to “speak” through its stories and traditions.

Growing up, I was always aware of the connection between nature and the rich stories I was told. This was likely because my family and I spent so much time outdoors - roaming the moors, heading to the beach, and walking the dogs through the woods. It was on these walks that my dad would share stories of giants and piskies, mythical Cornish beings, that gave meaning to the mysteries of the environment. These tales wove through both natural and built spaces, transforming features like ancient stones, weather-worn gargoyles, and intricate floral motifs into symbols rich with narrative significance.

My research examines how this interrelationship between folklore and landscape shapes Cornwall's cultural identity. It highlights the way the land influences folklore and, in turn, how folklore shapes the way people perceive and experience the land. This connection is especially important in the face of modern homogenisation, as revitalising these stories helps preserve Cornwall's distinct Celtic identity.

I will explore the role of droll tellers in preserving and adapting Cornish folklore, focusing on how narratives tied to specific landscapes such as; the woods, coast, or moors, have evolved over time. I will also examine the emotional and symbolic depth that transforms geographical spaces into places of cultural significance. My research will consider how folklore blurs the line between memory and myth, particularly in its use of the sublime and the eerie.



Research Methodology

My research employs a multifaceted approach to exploring the relationship between the Cornish landscape and its folklore. Through a qualitative analysis of Cornish legends and droll tales, I will examine recurring themes, motifs, and their cultural significance. This will be supported by site-specific exploration, using key locations as case studies to illustrate the deep interplay between landscape and story.

Photographic documentation will visually capture these landscapes and their connection to the stories that have been told upon them for generations.

A central part of this research is the role of droll tellers; storytellers who once carried Cornwall's oral traditions. To capture the essence of this tradition, I will create a series of short films that bring these tales to life, elevating them beyond the spoken word. These films will not only preserve the performative aspect of droll telling but also allow the audience to experience a sense of place, immersing them in the landscapes that inspired these stories.

This research is a journey across several significant sites in Cornwall, divided into three categories to fully capture the variety of its landscapes:

The Woodland

- Draynes Wood and Golitha Falls – Here, I will explore the atmosphere created by the trees and streams, the feelings they evoke, and the folklore tied to these ancient spaces.

The Coast

- St Cuthbert's Cave and the Doombar – These locations are rich with maritime folklore, and I will document and interpret the legends that have shaped them.

The Moors

- Bodmin Moor – A two-day hike will take me across the moorland, visiting several standing stones (Trevethy Quoit, the Hurlers, and ancient stone huts) and Tors (Rough Tor and the Cheesewring). These places hold countless myths of giants, spirits, and forgotten kings, all deeply entwined with the dramatic, windswept landscape.

Through this exploration, I hope to not only analyse the connection between Cornwall's folklore and its environment but also invite others to experience it - through stories, images, and film - in a way that echoes the immersive power of the original droll tellers.

Audience

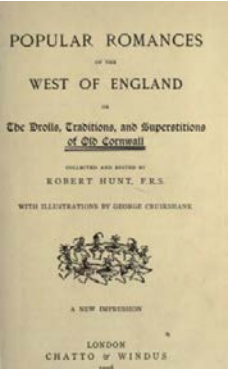
This project will take folklore enthusiasts, Cornish locals, tourists, and visitors on a journey through the myths and legends woven into Cornwall’s landscapes. Through storytelling, photography, and short films, it will reveal how the land and its folklore shape one another—from the misty moors of Bodmin to the whispering woodlands of Draynes and the storm-battered coastlines of Padstow. Whether you have grown up with these tales or are discovering them for the first time, this research will bring Cornwall’s folklore to life, offering a deeper connection to the stories that have shaped its identity for generations.

Key Texts

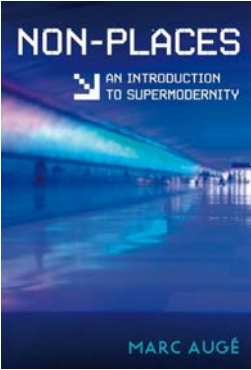
The thesis will draw on key texts to explore the connection between Cornish folklore and the landscape. Robert Hunt’s *Popular Romances of the West of England* will provide a foundation in Cornish oral traditions, while Marc Augé’s *Non-Places* will inform discussions on how globalisation threatens local storytelling. Margaret Somers’s narrative theory will support my analysis of how stories shape identity, and Ronald M. James’s studies on Cornish folklore will offer insights into its evolution.

Edward Relph’s work on place and placelessness will explore how landscapes shape cultural identity, while theories of the sublime from Edmund Burke and Jean-François Lyotard will examine the emotional impact of folklore. Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* will support the idea that landscapes actively shape myths, and Carl Wilhelm von Sydow’s concept of Ecotype folklore will explain how tales adapt to their surroundings. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* will guide my understanding of how narratives influence our experience of place.

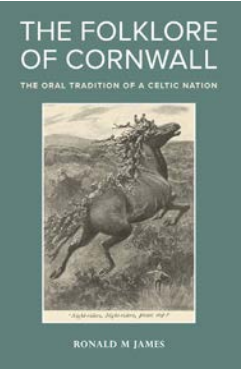
Together, these texts will form the theoretical basis for analysing the evolving relationship between Cornwall’s folklore, landscape, and identity.



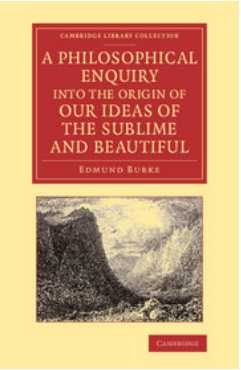
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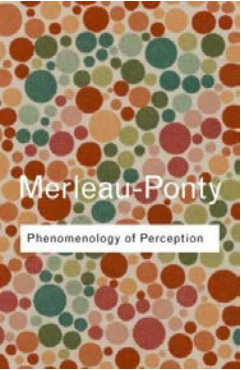
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Burke, E. (2009) A philosophical enquiry into the sublime and beautiful. Florence: Taylor and Francis.



Merleau-Ponty, M. and Smith, C. (1962) Phenomenology of perception. London: Routledge.

Artistic Inspiration

Inspired by Romantic painters such as J.M.W. Turner, I aim to capture a similar sense of drama, light, and atmosphere in my photographs of the Cornish landscape. Through composition, contrast, and the ever-changing interplay of weather and terrain, I hope to evoke the same awe and emotional depth that Turner’s paintings convey, immersing the viewer in the landscape’s raw beauty and mythic presence.



Turner, J.M.W., 1801. Edinburgh from below Arthur’s Seat.

Thesis Structure

Introduction

- Explore how Cornwall’s myths, legends, and folklore are deeply tied to its landscapes—its cliffs, moors, and ancient sites.
- Discuss how the Cornish language, once a vital part of storytelling and cultural identity, has been marginalized by modern Western culture.
- Explore how Cornwall risks becoming a “non-place,” where its rich stories and cultural depth are lost to superficial modernity.
- Introduce the role of narrative in creating a sense of place, focusing on legends like King Arthur and how they connect people to Cornwall’s history.
- Highlight the unique evolution of Cornish folklore, shaped by its isolation and the creativity of Droll Tellers, who adapted stories to the land.
- Present myself as a modern-day storyteller, preserving Cornwall’s heritage through stories, illustrations, and walking notes.
- Introduce readers to the case studies: Cornwall’s caves, woods, and moors, using folklore as a lens to experience the land as the Droll Tellers once did.

Chapter 1: The Droll Tellers

- Introduce the Droll Tellers: Droll Tellers were wandering storytellers in Cornwall who played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting the region’s oral traditions
- Describe how the tales told by Droll Tellers contributed significantly to Cornwall’s cultural identity and the sense of place

Chapter 2: The woods

- Introduce woodlands of being magical places and what is interesting about them in Cornwall
- Introduce Draynes woodland and Golitha falls
- Where it is and what discuss the some history of the site
- Tell Folkloric Stories of the site (Piskies living in the hollowed stumps and Drowned Kings that still haunt the woods)
- Enhance stories with Photographs/illustrations

Chapter 3: The Coast

- Introduce the coast of being dangerous and thrilling place that has a rich history
- Introduce Hollywell Bay (St Cuthberts cave) and Merlins Cave
- where it is and what discuss the some history of the site
- Tell Folkloric Stories of the site
- Enhance stories with Photographs/illustrations

Chapter 4: The MOORS

- Introduce the Moorland of being a dramatic and evocative place that has a rich and vaired history
- Introduce the Standing Stones (Trevethy Quoit) and tors (The Cheesewring), and bodmin moor as a whole
- Where it is and what discuss the some history of the site
- Tell Folkloric Stories of the site
- Enhance stories with Photographs/illustrations

Chapter 5: Conclusion

- Emphasize the importance of preserving these sites to safeguard cultural heritage and natural beauty for future generations.
- Highlight how exploring the natural and ancient world deepens our understanding of history and identity, with folklore adding an engaging, imaginative dimension.
- Encourage visitors to approach these sites as folklorists, connecting the dots between stories, landscapes, and cultural narratives in Cornwall and beyond.
- Stress that preserving and retelling these tales allows Cornwall’s culture and heritage to remain vibrant and ever-evolving, enriching both locals and visitors alike in spite of the displaced ancient race

Chapter “6”: Films

- Provide link to a play list of Cornish Drolls

For the Droll Tellers