

## **In search of the uncanny: inspired landscapes and modern witchcraft.**

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## **In search of the uncanny: inspired landscapes and modern witchcraft.**

The uncanny is commonly identified as an emotional encounter, where the known somehow slips out of place; it is embodied and sensory, but understood primarily as feelings. Home is always safe and familiar, history is rational and chronological, and the supernatural is both untrue and to be feared. Yet all these are challenged by modern witches with their view of an inspired world. Practitioner-visitors to the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Cornwall report a wealth of eerie experiences. Situated at the foot of Boscastle harbor, nestled down a steep and winding route, its place in the landscape encourages ready connections to esoteric experiences. This sense is reinforced by a network of sacred sites weaving outwards from the museum, and the well-used occult and folk magic items held in the displays: tangible and material sites of the uncanny. For these visitors, such encounters in the museum hold particular significance. Here, a dynamic landscape, inhabited by *genius loci* (spirit of place) combines with an inspired material culture contained inside the museum. In an animated cosmology, the uncanny is encountered through emotional, sensory, and embodied materialities.

Keywords: uncanny; inspirited landscape; modern witchcraft and Wicca; Museum of Witchcraft and Magic; Cornwall

## Encountering inspirited landscapes

[The witch's] whole life and being is devoted to the ever-present but unseen world of spirit. To the witch the spirit world is a reality, a living thing. To her everything has a spirit, a soul, a personality, be it animal, mineral, vegetable. That is why to us in the south-west we know and believe in the little people, oh you may laugh, my fine up country folk, but beware for indeed you are in the land where ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties still romp, stomp and go bump in the night. Come, let us show you what the witches and their spirits do ... (MWM text, Williamson, nd)

In the summer of 2001 I set off on a circular walk (figure 1) from the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic<sup>i</sup> (figure 2) with Sarah, a self-identified 'traditional witch' in her 30s. We followed the coastal path between Boscastle and Tintagel on the north Cornish coast, turning inland at Rocky Valley, pausing at the small carved labyrinths adjacent to the river Trevillet (figure 3). Sarah was full of anticipation as we climbed the winding footpath towards Nectans Glen, with its 18m waterfall plunging into a natural stone basin (*kieve*) (figure 4). She described it as a place full of magic, and provided advice on how to look, listen, and feel, to open out the senses.

We reached the top of the glen and followed the path, down the steep steps towards the sound of rushing water. It was late summer and the day was humid but the glen shaded and cool, getting colder as we descended. We stood in the river, barefoot, watching the water noisily streaming down, misting the air and churning into the *kieve*, pouring out through a ring of rock

into a deep pool before passing more gently through the valley down towards the sea. It was spectacular. All around us were offerings, tokens, sympathetic magic, and memorials. Tall 'faery stacks', piles of stones and slate, balanced in the river and on the cliff ledges, and 'clouties' - ribbons and strips of fabric tied to the trees.<sup>ii</sup> Sarah took a deep breath and said this is a rich place. The climb down the steps had felt like immersion into a thick soupy atmosphere. You can feel the energy here, she said, see how live this space is: on the edges, in the air, the river, rocks and ground, 'it is all alive, and we are part of it'. Pay attention, she suggested, to the changes in air, what can we see, taste, smell, and hear: the land is full of spirits, and the very rocks are alive.

### **Uncanny opportunities**

Chatting to a visitor at the museum today. She said she'd woken with a strong desire to drive down to the Cornish coast. She marvelled at the museum and how it felt very familiar. She said how odd it was as not only had she never visited before, but did not know of its existence. She kept repeating that she had simply followed her instincts and just arrived at the harbor and found the museum in front of her (Fieldwork diary July 2001).

The uncanny is usually identified as an effect, a 'felt experience that disturbs the body' (Trigg 2012, 27), as the known and familiar jolts out of place, inviting prickly sensations, goosebumps on the skin, hair raised, all senses stretched. Royle observes that discomfort arises from the 'peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar' (2003: 1), and compounded by the belief that spirits or ghosts are simultaneously alarming and untrue (Royle 2003). However, while uncanniness might seem abstract and invisible, for many modern witches and Wiccans,<sup>iii</sup> these effects can mediate potential encounters with other-than-human worlds. An inspirited nature is not necessarily benevolent, yet the warning prickle on the back of the neck can beckon towards

possibilities. While startling, it can be welcomed, even anticipated, offering a newfound homeland in a tangibly inspirited landscape.

Contemporary witchcraft traditions largely fall under the umbrella of modern nature-based polytheistic Pagan religions that have been growing in Britain since the 1950s (Harvey 1997). Fashioned as an ‘old religion’ that remembers the ‘spiritual values, ideas, ideals and practices of Pagan ancestors (Crowley 1998, 170) and borrows from New Age principles which focus on personal transformation (Heelas 1996), witchcraft and Wicca are self-styled variants of ‘modern-day esoteric mystery tradition[s]’, that venerate the Goddess and God as personified deities (Pearson 2002, 135). While modern witchcraft traditions have their roots in initiatory covens, there has been a shift towards solitary or more informal groupings. It is generally agreed that today’s practices are largely shaped by Gerald Gardner in the 1940s,<sup>iv</sup> and claims of continuity with the ancient past are considered foundation myths rather than literal histories (Ramsey 1998). Links between prehistoric fertility cults, early modern witch accusations, and contemporary practices are implausible. Instead scholars show that modern witchcraft reflects nineteenth and early twentieth interests in occultism, spiritualism, comparative religions, and folklore (Hutton 1999; Magliocco 2004) and has roots in Renaissance Christianity (Greenwood 2000). While today’s practitioners recognize these recent foundations, they also continue to find more emotional ways of engaging with the past. In part by identifying cunning folk as practical ancestors, but also by tracing continuities through enduring magical-religious practices (Cornish 2019). In this context magic describes a set of techniques that involve the imagination and emotions towards changing consciousness (Adler 1986, 8; Magliocco 2015, 635).

Strang notes that Pagan environmental movements are inspired by indigenous nature religions (2015). European magical-religious witches do not constitute an indigenous group,

although there are recognizable parallels with Ginsburg's 'indigenous uncanny' where ancestors, ghosts, and spirits comprise part of the ordinary world (2018, 68). Some modern witches have also been motivated by 'indigenous perspectives on and approaches to' place as inherently sacred (Blain and Wallis 2008, 315), or shamanism (Hume 1998), predicated on a sense of an underlying 'root religion' (York 2004, 2015) made present through 'magical consciousness' as an 'awareness of the interrelatedness of all things in the world' (Greenwood 2005, 7).

Communication with a sacred and animated nature has become part of modern magical-religious witchcraft practice as ecological ideas are taken up by practitioners (Crowley 1998; Hume 1998). The 1990s saw a turn amongst British witches towards Earth Mysteries to invoke the deep past that resonated with established ritual use of the cardinal points and elements – earth, air, fire and water (Doyle White 2014; White 2017). Publications such as Alfred Watkins' *The Old Straight Track* (1925) taken up by New Agers and Pagans in the 1970s and 1980s (Michell 1969; Pennick and Devereux 1989) became influential to shaping modern witchcraft as a Western mystery tradition, where ancient monuments were interpreted as signs of pre-Christian material spirituality as well as portals for accessing otherworlds (Mathews and Mathews 1996; Hume 2007).

Perspectives on modern witchcraft as a material religion have focused on the active power of the imagination in closed ritual groups (Harrington 2006; Rountree 2006a). Techniques such as 'casting a circle' create ritual spaces that allow for 'going between the worlds' (Rountree 2012). I take a different approach, and consider how witches and Wiccans, regardless of initiatory status, approach inspired landscapes where 'the land is alive with spirits of place, spirits of ancestors, deities, and otherworldly being such as fairies or dwarves' (Greenwood 2005, 61). These are not anthropomorphic personifications of deities or spirits, but rather inhabitants of

a shared sensuous world ‘full of persons, only some of whom are human’ (Harvey 2005; Harvey and Wallis 2015, 25), with a ‘dimension of shared consciousness’ (MacLellan and Cross 2012, 5).

Using my walk with Sarah, I address interconnected themes in how witches encounter and anticipate uncanny materiality in an inspirited landscape: temporality, imagination, the senses, and home. Phenomenological accounts of the landscape attend to the ways that places are active agents, and contribute towards making meaning and experience (Bender 1998; Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017). The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Cornwall, situates itself in a manifestly live landscape, partly inspired by the nearby Rocky Valley carved labyrinths as potent occult symbol, and Nectans Glen as a sacred site. Inside the museum, stories relate the occult expertise of West Country wise women. These strands were combined in 1998 when a museum exhibit, a skeleton, considered that of a Bodmin witch, was buried in nearby Minster Woods. It is now marked by a memorial to ‘Joan Wytte/ Born 1775/ Died 1813 In Bodmin Gaol/ Buried 1998/ No Longer Abused’: a monument to an ancestor (figure 5), and a continued museum exhibit through relating the story (figure 6). These legitimate the museum’s location in Boscastle, which in turn are enhanced by proximity to the museum. All potentially generate uncanniness.

An inspirited world is not necessarily benign. Aisher (this issue) provides a valuable reminder that encounters with spirits and other-than-human worlds are to be approached with caution. Witches find the effects of the uncanny unsettling, but rather than as an irrational response that must be overcome by logical thinking or fleeing, it can be faced, with all senses open. They find themselves at home in these strange and sometimes unfamiliar places.

## Situating the uncanny

... [going round] that corner as you begin to drive down the valley [to Boscastle], and the air literally changes. It's a very physical experience, it's the whole magical valley thing. You know you are entering a different world, it really hits you (Wiccan practitioner, 2002).

The uncanny has become a popular metaphor to explore alienation under the conditions of late modernity (Collins and Jervis 2008; Johnson 2013). This is pertinent to contemporary witchcraft as while practitioners assert continuities to the distant past, and aim to rekindle ways of living perceived to be lost through secularization and modernity, it is a highly modern practice (Heelas 1993; Vitebsky 1995; Berger 1999). However, in this instance, these anticipated experiences are material rather than metaphorical, and are manifested in a literally animated world.

The key elements underpinning the uncanny, time slippage, threat to familiarity, and fear of unnatural spirits, are commonly taken for granted as irrational figments of the imagination, a 'crisis of the natural' (Royle 2003, 1). This is challenged by inspired worldview taken by modern witches. Instead, uncanniness marks potentially potent places in the landscape where they anticipate a sense of homecoming, and an emotional and creative historicity, as they embrace otherworlds and other-than-human beings. Unlike psychoanalytical analyses that focus on tensions between the self and experience, and pivot on conjunctions between memory and place (for example: Trigg 2012), my discussion centers the uncanny as mediator between human and other-than-human worlds through the imagination and the senses. It reconfigures assumptions about relationships between spirit, temporality and home.

While the psychologist Jentsch first addressed the uncanny as a subject for investigation (Jentsch 1997 [1906]), it is Freud who dominates the field with his identification of it as a primal fear, expressed through the subconscious and understood through psychoanalysis. Freud described how repetitions between the familiar and unfamiliar (*unheimlich* and *heimlich*) cause effects that destabilize ordinary senses of being in the world (Freud 2003 [1919], 2013 [1912]). The familiar suddenly appears unfamiliar, generating feelings of alienation or fright; the past erupts in the present, forming some kind of *déjà vu*; these hint at supernatural worlds populated by spirits, something hidden, possibly dangerous, haunting the present (Bryant 2016). According to twenty-first century Western conventions, these feelings are not literally true, and require rational intellectualizing to adjust to concrete reality.

The concept of the uncanny bears some historical consideration. Rather than unchanged since 'earliest times' (Freud 2003 [1919]), Royle claims it is shaped by Enlightenment and Romantic philosophies that accentuated logical criteria to explain reality. Contrasts between reality and the imagination were sharpened, while spaces between human and spirit worlds reconfigured. New forms of scientific explanation excluded the inexplicable, and the presence of spirits impossible in a realist material world.<sup>v</sup> Abram considers that 'making sense' can concern sensual awareness rather than 'literal truth' (2012, 265), while other scholars have argued that the imagination and the senses have been downplayed in Enlightenment philosophies (Hanegraaff 2016; Ingold 2013; Howes 2005), and magic marginalized by rationalist Western cultural history (Greenwood 2009, 2019). Modern historiography has emphasized a realist linear chronology in which the past cannot return (Royle 2003), although Stewart observes that the past does not stay in place, but haunts the present through memories and memorials, always potentially uncanny (2017b). These suggest alternate ways of attending to the politics and poetics



of uncanny experiences distinct from the methodological legacy of European modernity (Goslinga 2012, 388).

### **Coming home to the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic**

Being in Boscastle, well, it just makes me feel at home, that I've found my place, if you know what I mean. Maybe it's all that history, or the magic? There's certainly something there, you can feel it in the air, something tangible. But different from other places. I try and get here every year, do a pilgrimage to the museum and round about. Bolsters me up for the rest of the year (Wiccan, interview 2002).

Contemporary witches who visit the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic see it as a valuable heritage resource, they consider the collection and surrounding Cornish landscape as magically potent. First visits are often considered a little uncanny: entering a strange place, strange because unknown as well as a little odd, is recalled by many as familiar and homelike, somehow fated. Sarah tells me that she was taken aback on her first visit by how familiar it felt. The mysterious feelings it generated felt like an invitation to enter, and affirmed her conviction that following magical-religious witchcraft was her rightful path.

Museums are notoriously seen as places with the power to enchant (Bouquet and Porto 2005), and the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic particularly so (Candlin 2013). Cecil Williamson founded the museum on the Isle of Man in 1951, and after some peripatetic years, relocated in Boscastle in 1960. Graham King took over in 1996, who in 2013 donated the collection to the Museum of British Folklore (director Simon Costin).<sup>vi</sup> It is a successful independent museum, with a high footfall largely made up of passing tourists (Candlin 2015).

There is no documented occult history in Boscastle. Williamson was in search of a ‘tourist honey pot’, and chose the attractive harbor town for its tourist footfall, being on the Thomas Hardy heritage trail (1976, 26). Sixty years later the museum contributes to the town’s thriving tourist industry, and is echoed in the many shops selling esoteric and New Age commodities.

The Boscastle location is now considered somewhat inevitable, informed by the proximity of nearby Nectans Glen and Rocky Valley claimed to have long histories of pilgrimage and sacred use, and which in turn are reinforced by the museum’s authoritative status. Like the town, these sites also have scant documented histories of esotericism,<sup>vii</sup> popular accounts provide powerful mythic qualities (Houlbrook 2016), and the memorial to Joan Wytte in Minster Woods is not as straightforward as it appears.<sup>viii</sup> These accounts are boosted by commonplace expectations that Cornwall’s Celtic past generates senses of a folkloric and pagan past distant from the secularized modern world, and nearby Tintagel lends Arthurian legends that indicate a landscape steeped in mystical histories (Hale 2004). Histories of Cornish religious and industrial marginalization are contested (Payton 1997), but attachments to creative and emotional versions of the past are well documented (Bowman 1996). The information text for a replica of the Rocky Valley labyrinth states:

three miles away from this spot you can find this pre-historic maze stone carved into a living rock face, proof that from ancient times man and his magic making with the world of spirit were active in this area ... that is why this Museum of Witchcraft is located here, one is standing on the edge of the beyond (MWM text, Williamson).

Williamson deftly situates the museum within the local landscape, and makes the spirit world near. Tales of witches selling wind spells to sailors from the harbor enhance occult reputations, and are reinforced by connections to ‘sea witchcraft’ (Patterson 2015). The associations between

a premodern yet recognizable historical context that informs the present provides an uncanny history (Collins and Jervis 2008). In contrast to post-Enlightenment conventions of reality (Royle 2003), otherwise unnerving relationships between reality and spirit are inverted and made ordinary.

The museum has a large collection of ritual tools and occult objects donated by twentieth-century British Wiccans and witches. It holds displays West Country folk magic items that demonstrate magical protection and healing, while intentionally malevolent curses reveal the shadows of occult practices. It is perhaps obvious that a museum about witchcraft and magic would hold enticing artefacts considered secret, hidden, or supernatural, that produces tensions that repel and attract. While initial cabinets show witchcraft from the outside through popular images and histories of persecution, further in it shifts to a more experiential view.<sup>ix</sup> The changing perspective generates slippages between familiarity and strangeness.

Feelings of homeliness are marked by moments of recognition by many witches when they spot recognizable ritual tools, or natural, found objects repurposed as potent magical items, and it mediates the ways in which they recognize themselves as part of what they feel and experience in the museum. It echoes Boscaljon's (2016) insistence that feeling familiarity in strange places can provoke uncanny feelings. The welcome discovery of familiar items amongst otherwise disconcerting objects can be followed a moment later to a distinct sense of unease. For visiting witches, with a view of the world as inherently animated, live things are contained within glass cabinets. Sharks' teeth, shells, stones, sticks, bones, used for protection, healing, cursing, are seen as active objects with their own agency, deployed by those who know how to navigate such knowledge. As one remarked, 'more like a zoo than a museum', busy and noisy, the air full of competing energy. Sarah reflected that while strange feelings might be warnings of

danger, they are sometimes invitations to pay closer attention. Both indicate the holistic sensuous world offered by a numinous nature.

At the center of the museum is ‘the witch’s cottage’, a nineteenth century wise woman’s home (figure 7). Domestic and professional occult skills are practiced by Joan, a surprisingly lifelike mannequin, who sits at the hearth surrounded by the tools of her trade. Historians note that this kind of idealized image is conjured by the modern imagination (Purkiss 1996), but it is immediately recognizable as a popular trope by visitors who peer in the window and peep around the door, trespassing into private space, amplified by the sense that she might look up at any moment. Joan’s cottage is a literal representation of home, and awkward tensions are invoked between strangeness and familiarity in this display of intimate domesticity. Nestled alongside holed stones, rowan twigs, and knotted rope, are functional household objects: knitting needles, cups, and brooms, brimming with folk magic possibilities to protect the family and home from supernatural danger. The slippage between familiar objects with unfamiliar purposes creates spaces that provoke strange sensations in this dimly lit corner of the museum.

### **Bone, spirit, stone and the elements**

I’ve got a stone from St Nectans on my altar at home, I found it when I was here a couple of years ago. It just looks like an ordinary stone, but my eye was drawn to it, it called to me, it was just at the edge of the river, that powerful water had been running over it, I like to think that a piece of that magical place stays with me (Sarah, witch, 2002)

I return to Royle's suggestion that the uncanny must be contextualised around reality, imagination, and senses, rather than treated as a primal response (2003). As ideas about folklore, Earth Mysteries, and environmentalism have become threaded through modern witchcraft, greater emphasis is placed on developing sensual and dynamic relationships with an inspired earth (Crowley 1998; Greenwood 2005). The sites around the museum offer experiences with other-than-human worlds that roughly correspond with distinct elements of uncanniness: unstable temporality, the presence of spirits, and precarious senses of home, through elements and place. They are encountered as potent dwelling places of spirits of place (*genius loci*), borders between worlds are worn down by repeated visits. My walk with Sarah shows how uncanniness alerts possibilities by suggesting the conditions of otherworldly experiences: temporality, homeliness, and spirits. It invites dislocation between reality and the imagination, creates spaces where uncanny experiences can be provoked.

Not all our talking concerned immediately esoteric matters. Sarah's appreciation of the local ecology became apparent as she identified trees, flowers, and wildlife. Like many witches she takes pride in her knowledge of flora and fauna, explaining that the first principle of witchcraft is to become attuned to the cycles and inhabitants of the environment. She went on to explain that expanding her understanding towards other other-than-human worlds concerned making it part of everyday worlds, neither unreal or unnatural. This did not necessarily make the inhabitants kindly or harmless, she recommended caution akin to the dangers that are around in the visible, material world. As we set off from the museum she reminded me to anticipate the unexpected, and to be aware of shifting senses, emotions, and changing atmospheres. She suggested we listen for things that might not be heard and look for things that might be invisible:

to pay attention to peripheral vision, as the known and familiar slips out of focus, and the unknown makes itself visible or heard.

Royle suggests that unease with unstable senses of chronology are a consequence of modern linear and realist histories. In the context of magical consciousness, the kinds of uncanny feelings generated by slippages in time suggests other qualities of temporality. These may resonate with alternate temporalities found in dreaming, spirit possession or Australian ‘dreamtime’ (Stewart 2017a; Lambek 2003; Greenwood 2013). These evoke Abram’s call to expand modalities of awareness towards something less strictly spatial or temporal as he challenges conventional European fears of spirit worlds through a ‘sensuous world’ (2012, 206). Alternative forms of knowledge, less rational and more creative and emotional, help create the conditions in which emotional and embodied responses to place can be registered. That modern witches are often less concerned about the plausibility of rational histories and embrace empathetic approaches to mythic-magical senses of the past is part of the more nuanced sense of historicity found among today’s practitioners.

Storytelling is one way of making sense of places, and the landscape works through the imagination towards knowledge and identity (Greenwood 2005, 145). Specific places hold stories, remembered through qualities of light, vegetation, topography, and contribute towards alternative accounts of the past. The experiences Sarah relates are not quite made out of personal memories, and are dissimilar from historical testaments to the past. At the glen, she explained that the hermitage built by the Celtic Saint Nectan in the fifth century heralded continual pilgrimage building layers of sacred use (later, another witch tells me it is named after Nechtan, a Cornish water god and guardian of the sacred well). She reflected that while the story of the saint and his hermitage is said to be untrue, her powerful feelings of spirit of place, *genius loci*,

provides evidence of a sacred history; she explains that her stories come out of the land, not laid on top of it. They open out possibilities with other-than-human beings who dwell here, the inhabitants who make it viscerally potent, the ancient rocks encountered as ancestors. She spread her arms wide to include the cliffs, trees, ferns, and stones, and pointed to the water as a significant elemental force pounding loudly and relentlessly through the glen.

The inherent spirit of place described at the glen is in contrast to carved labyrinths which act on the landscape over time. At Rocky Valley, Sarah encouraged me to trace the labyrinth with my finger and observed that instead of thinking about when the carvings were made, to consider meditative action as a means to create timeless spaces, and to focus on the way in and out of the labyrinth as a portal to other worlds and other experiences. The carvings are worn and the rock shiny through repeated tracings. She tells me that although the boundaries between the worlds will have become thin over time, through repeated human activity working through the small carved labyrinths, inherent spirit of place will have attracted people in here in the first place. As we walked from place to place, Sarah reminded me that everything here is conscious, she said, all the elements, the air, the earth, and the water flowing through, is vividly alive, to be felt, seen, smelt, and heard. ‘Just sit. Watch and listen and feel; use all your senses’, she suggested, ‘stretch out your arms and close your eyes’ to feel the *genius loci*. Sarah told me she has taken photographs full of orbs, considered signs of porosity between worlds (Wojcik 2009).

Unusual, eerie, experiences are reported at the glen, In her search for wild water, Lou Hart recalls hearing a ‘high pitched singing sound’ in the watery air in this spot (2012). Hume (2007) discusses how crucial the senses are in understanding animated worlds. It is the senses that are pricked through uncanniness, Sarah felt connected to ancestors of multiple kinds, and identified these places as sites where the veil between worlds is thin, and temporality is unstable,

where the past, present and future are not so easily distinguishable. She tells me that some visitors think it important to become part of the place by leaping through the ring of rock at the foot of the waterfall in the glen, carrying this out at midwinter is said to be a potent act of transformation. While Sarah and I stood at the edge of the pool at the bottom of the waterfall, the combination of changing temperature, the noise of the water, the feeling of mist in the air, and the luminous light reflected through the overhanging trees creates ideal conditions for altered states of consciousness where time becomes immaterial. We stood in the soupy air, feeling the cold spray on our faces, mesmerized by the sound, sight, and even smell, of continually falling water, filling the glen around us.

The uncanny effects provoked at the memorial stone to Joan Wytte overlap with those found at Nectans Glen and Rocky Valley. Again the senses are engaged to generate senses of transformative and timeless spaces in an inspired world, and made meaningful in specific places. There are also differences in the kind of encounters considered likely here. Considered a conventional kind of ancestor through the claim, if contested, that these are the corporeal remains of a nineteenth century Bodmin witch. It readily resonates with remembrance, as a permanent memorial to ward off forgetting (Nora 1989; Rowlands and Tilley 2006). As a deceased ancestor, or ghost, Joan is perhaps a more ordinary kind of spirit than the other-than-human entities who dwell in an inspired landscape. Whether or not they claim skills at mediumship, conversations with Joan have been reported over the years, first to complain how being permanently on show in the museum, and since the burial, at her comfort at being at peace, at home in the woods. History is unstable, and always potentially uncanny as the past haunts the present (Stewart 2017b), and the past can feel very present at this site.



The feelings of uncanniness alert witches to the presence of other-than-human beings and otherworldly realities. While these are not necessarily without danger, as witches are more likely to grasp these as possibilities or opportunities they take very different positions from those who take conventional rationalist views of spirits and ghosts as something to be feared. In contrast, what it means to feel at home is often considered unstable and subjective (Boscaljon 2016). It is less extraordinary to find familiarity in strange places than it is to consider ancestors and spirits as ordinary inhabitants of the world. However, ideas about finding a home has a distinct pertinence for many witches who use this to describe their sense of connection and familiarity when they first encounter Pagan communities and witches. Unexpected feelings of familiarity in strange places, or kinship with strangers, are a reminder they have felt out of place before (Anczyk and Vencálek 2013; Harrington 2002; Harvey 1999). Otherworldly encounters are included as a dimension of homeliness through a sense of kindred nature, elements in the landscape are included as ancestors in this sense of feeling at home.

### **Conclusion: finding a home for the uncanny**

Walking with Sarah reveals how witches see the landscape as inspirited. Uncanniness works as a marker for opportunities with dynamic other-than-human worlds and their inhabitants. It mediates between one kind of reality and others through the imagination and the senses. As time slips, strange places become eerily familiar and spirits make their presence known.

Modern witchcraft has undergone significant shifts since the 1940s. While initiatory covens are still preferred by some, others have embraced solitary or informal group practices. For many witches, the uptake of Earth Mysteries offered new ways of engaging sacred sites and

the land. These encouraged perspectives that take up less representational and more animated attitudes towards nature and place. Personified deities remain relevant to many, but an inspirited landscape is also populated by more animistic and less anthropomorphic inhabitants. Spirits, ancestors, and deities are potentially everywhere, not only when invited into formally prepared ritual spaces.

This sense of an inspirited landscape does not mean that practitioners live in a permanent state of altered consciousness or dwell at the boundaries between the worlds, but seek opportunities for communication and transformative experiences. There are techniques, through storytelling and the senses, where magical consciousness as a form of knowledge is invested through expanding the imagination. Less literal or chronological histories can provide the space for timeless senses of the past through stories that provoke the imagination in specific places. The otherworld is encountered through hearing, seeing, smelling, feeling things which are hidden, perhaps invisible, provoking sensory effects. For modern witches, uncanniness hints that spirits of place or ancestors are nearby, or that the veil between the worlds is thin.

The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, and the surrounding sacred sites, monuments, natural phenomena and memorials provide different examples of how uncanniness can be anticipated, even welcomed, as an anticipated effect that mediates between worlds and different forms of knowledge. Live objects fill the museum, demonstrating the material reality of other-than-human spirit. Nectans Glen is inherently inspirited, seen as an ancient but timeless place. The labyrinths at Rocky Valley are considered potent portals between worlds as well as transformative symbols, wearing down the boundaries between worlds. The memorial to Joan Wytte in Minster Woods fits into ordinary senses of remembrance, yet the accounts of mediumship and communication with an ancestor provides uncanny echoes of problematic

histories, compounded by the probability that she did not exist as a corporal individual, but as a mythic entity and a real skeleton. Uncanniness builds in layers at her memorial stone, haunted by stories and multiple voices.

In an inspirited world other-than-humans are made ordinary rather than supernatural, approached with caution, but often welcomed. The landscape is always potentially homely, where feelings of familiarity are provoked through the senses, by seeing, listening, hearing, and feeling around the edges of perception. These are strange places but are uncannily familiar to practitioners of modern witchcraft marked by sensory and experiential experiences.

Figure 1. Map of Boscastle and the surrounding sites (© Andrew Nisbet 2019)

Figure 2. The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, Boscastle (© Museum of Witchcraft and Magic 2019)

Figure 3. Rocky Valley labyrinths (© Helen Cornish 2004)

Figure 4. Nectans Glen waterfall (© Helen Cornish 2004)

Figure 5. Joan Wytte memorial, Minster Woods (© Helen Cornish 2014)

Figure 6. Joan Wytte memorial, Museum of Witchcraft and Magic (© Helen Cornish 2014)

Figure 7 Joan's Cottage, Museum of Witchcraft and Magic (© Helen Cornish 2019)

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- <sup>i</sup> The museum had been known as the Museum of Witchcraft since established in Boscastle in 1960. The name was changed in 2015 to better reflect the collection.
- <sup>ii</sup> These sites are scattered with offerings, and 'ritual litter' generates environmental problems alongside demonstrating spiritual significance. See for example, Blain and Wallis (2004); Houlbrook (2016); Rountree (2006b). At high summer the density of these offerings increases with greater visitor numbers.
- <sup>iii</sup> The terms witch and Wicca are complex and unstable. In Britain witches who follow initiatory forms that recall lineages with Gardner or other twentieth century leader are usually considered Wiccans. Others who reject formal religious structures and see their practice as a craft often describe themselves as traditional witches or just witch. In this article I use 'witch and Wicca' as loose categories to describe contemporary practitioners who self identify as witches and claim resonance with nature in some form.
- <sup>iv</sup> Realist histories of modern witchcraft remain contentious, although the publication of Hutton's *Triumph of the Moon* (1999) marked a turning point in the uptake of strategic positions that aimed to separate the history of the movement from more experiential claims about the past.
- <sup>v</sup> The emergence of Spiritualist movements in the nineteenth century provides alternate accounts of the presence of spirits based on rational, scientific claims. See Lamont (2004).
- <sup>vi</sup> More detailed histories of the museum can be found in Patterson (2014); Godwin (2011); Hannant and Costin (2016).
- <sup>vii</sup> Accounts of the glen as an ancient sacred site dating back to the fifth century when it is claimed that Nectan, a Celtic Saint built a hermitage here are not reflected in the documentary record, but are traced to the romantic claims of nineteenth century folklorists such as Robert Steve Hawker (Houlbrook 2016). Nevertheless it is perceived as a multifaith pilgrimage site by Pagans, Christians, and New Age followers. The site is privately owned, charges an entry fee and offers a small café, and shrine where offerings can be left and candles lit. Labyrinths have a well established reputation as ancient mystical tropes (Pennick 1990; Matthews 1970), and the carved labyrinths at Rocky

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Valley seem unarguably archaic, legitimated by an English Heritage sign that suggests they are ‘Probably of the early Bronze age (1800-1400 BC)’. However, some Earth Mysteries writers dispute their antiquity, and suggest they were carved by a seventeenth century north Cornish coast occult group, the Serpent Cult (Ellis 1999). The monument gained public attention in the 1950s in the London Illustrated News (Gibson 1954) shortly before Williamson moved the museum to nearby Boscastle.

- <sup>viii</sup> The memorial to Joan Wytte, was created by Graham King in 1999 after he buried the skeleton that had been exhibited in the museum. Despite the popular belief that these were the remains of a woman, the ‘fighting fairy woman of Bodmin’ believed to be a witch, imprisoned after a violent outburst, there is no record of her life, arrest, or death. It is likely that the account of her life and death was conjured by Williamson to situate evocative accusations of witchcraft in a local, albeit anomalous historical context (Semmens 2010; Cornish 2013). The account of her life has been embellished by folk writers (Jones 1999; Wallis 2003) after her death to become more akin to those of modern witches and Wiccans.
- ix Between 1996-2015 this experiential shift was marked by an installation of a stone circle, replaced by a gallery for temporary exhibitions in 2016.