

# **Talking with the land: walking magic, storytelling and the imagination around the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic**

## **Abstract**

Relations between people and places can be understood through the metaphor of conversation. Contemporary Pagans and Witches who visit the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Cornwall often take walks into the surrounding countryside. By tracing three walks (Rocky Valley labyrinths, Saint Nectan's Waterfall, and the memorial to Joan Wytte in Minster Woods), I show how assemblages of walking, places, and stories can be configured through expanded temporalities and magical consciousness. Practitioners move between the land, the collection, and the museum, where empirical histories and materiality are entangled with sensory, emotional, and imaginal experiences

## **Introducing conversations with the landscape**

Boscastle is a small harbour town in north Cornwall. The coastline is rugged, and steeped in myths, amplified by the legends of King Arthur in nearby Tintagel. At the end of the harbour, where the river Valency meets the sea is the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic (figure 1), a compelling destination for many practitioners of modern magical-religious witchcraft traditions. Inside, the artefacts are encountered as potent, with many considered the tangible remains of wise women or Wayside Witches. Objects resonate with the sea and watery elements. Beyond the collection lies a manifestly live landscape, where places and routes demand attention: two small labyrinths carved in the cliff face at Rocky Valley (figure 2), the waterfall at St Nectans Glen (figure 3), the memorial stone laid in Minster Woods that remembers the life and death of Joan Wytte, alleged witch of Bodmin town (figure 4). While

Rocky Valley and Minster Wood are freely accessible, St Nectans Glen is privately owned, there is an entrance fee and the gates close at sunset. They are all significant spaces where elemental spirits dwell, ancestral bones lie, and ancient magical practices take place. The sites are connected through walking along river paths, over windy headlands, through ancient broadleaf woodlands, and the journeys, walking through these routes, are integral to the experience.<sup>1</sup>

(figure 1 Museum of Witchcraft and Magic © Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, 2019)

(figure 2: Rocky Valley Labyrinths © Cornish 2014)

(figure 3: Waterfall at St Nectan's Glen © Cornish, 2015)

(figure 4: Memorial to Joan Wytte, Minster Woods © Cornish 2014)

The steep, winding road that leads into Boscastle is often described by visitors to the museum as a path into a magical valley: the overhanging trees form a leafy tunnel prompting esoteric expectations. These days Cornwall has a reputation for myth and legend: often perceived as outside modernity.<sup>2</sup> The coastline is rugged and open to the elements, steeped with stories of shipwrecks and storms; inland moorlands, studded with monuments, stone circles and tors built in ancient times; and wooded valleys follow river route appear to offer sanctuary from the elements, although folklore warns of occult threats. Together these provoke the imagination, weaving between experience and ideas about the past.

Conversations with ancestral spirits who dwell in the landscape or with *genii loci*, spirits of place, are found through emotional, and sensuous entanglements with other-than-human worlds; places where the veil between the worlds are said to be thin, where communication with other than humans become possible.

The imagination is conventionally mapped against ready distinctions between fiction and reality, distinct from empirical markers of documentary history. In my anthropological research with modern witches and Wiccans I found the imaginal worked as a vital element in immersive responses with places and elements.<sup>3</sup> The landscape is apprehended as dynamic, as part of a ‘living and inspirited cosmos’ (Greenwood 2005: vii). For magical practitioners visiting the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Boscastle, Cornwall, sensory connections between the collection and the landscape are relational. They provoke active responses, and can be situated as conversations with other-than-human elements.

Conversation is an active practice. Benediktsson and Lund (2010) use it to consider relations between humans and the land. They cite Gadamer’s observation that as we fall into conversation (1960 in Benediktsson and Lund 2010: 1), we become involved, and while we may anticipate the outcomes, we do not know what will ‘come out’ in advance. For Dewsbury and Cloke, the combination of attention and action is an ‘embodied practices of being in the world, including ways of seeing, but extending beyond sight to both a sense of being that includes all senses and an openness to being affected’ (2009: 696). It is through conversations and walking in place, that embodied and multisensual aspects of ‘the social’ can be appreciated (Bates and Rhys-Taylor 2017: 2).

It is well established that walking is a ‘profoundly social activity’ (Ingold and Vergunst 2008: 1), and has been enthusiastically taken up as an ethnographic method (Kusenbach 2003; Bates and Rhys-Taylor 2017). These often take up more phenomenological dimensions, gathering histories and practices through synaesthetic, material and social sensory experiences (Tilley 2012: 28); experiential and iterative processes that challenge the usual writing and research conventions (Cheeseman, Chakrabarti, and Österlund-Pötzsch et al 2020). Walking in the land is generative and sensory, and urges attention to emergent meanings as conversational.

In this article, I trace how modern magical-religious witches have an inspired approach to the land which becomes particularly visible through the museum collection and a set of nearby walks to sites of particular interest. I share stories and recollections from a walk to the three sites I took with Sarah, a witch I met through the museum. While Sarah and I talk as we walk, conversations are expansive and include sensory participation with the environment and with other-than-human elements. These show how sensory and imaginal approaches to the landscape work as active elements through expanded temporalities and magical consciousness – as dialogic and experiential.

### **Modern witchcraft, animism and the imagination**

Magical-religious witchcraft is one of several practices gathered under the umbrella of modern nature-based polytheistic Pagan religions that have flourished since the mid twentieth-century. While there are different witchcraft traditions, most are shaped by theological and ritual practices rooted in Gerald Gardner's mid-twentieth century Wicca, an initiatory witchcraft inspired by ideas of ancient pagan religion (Doyle White 2016). Modern witchcraft has often been fashioned as a practice with unbroken links to the deep past, although these historical origins have been subjected to careful scrutiny in recent years (Cornish 2009, 2013). Scholars such as Ronald Hutton have demonstrated the broad inspirations from artistic, philosophical, literary, spiritual and occult foundations from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries (Hutton 1999). These historical underpinnings are visible through ritual practices such as seasonal and lunar festivals, solitary and collective magical rituals, and attending sacred sites and archaeological monuments. Through these activities they share a sense of a dynamic and live land.

As participants in a Pagan nature religion, many (but not all) modern witches revere nature, and approach the land as animated, inhabited by ancestors, spirits, elementals, where humans are only ‘one kind of people’ (Rountree 2012: 308). Giovanna Parmigiani notes that contemporary Pagan spirituality is informed by ‘belief in the interconnectedness and relationality of the universe’, sometimes considered ‘neo-animism or a ‘relational ontology’ (Parmigiani 2022: 4-5). Graham Harvey challenges normative assumptions that humans are separate from nature or the environment: ‘our bodies and all our senses, feelings, emotions and thoughts, are rooted in our relationships to places and the other beings with whom we co-inhabit places, the world, and the cosmos’ (Harvey 2012: 8). The imagination is the driver for creative and reciprocal communication between ‘inspired beings’ and humans, through sensory and analogic practices. Situated as ‘magical consciousness’ (Greenwood 2005, 2019) or ‘participatory consciousness’ (Magliocco 2015).

Scientific conventions that distinguish between the ‘realms of reality and the imagination’ are considered by Ingold to be so deeply ingrained that they appear ‘self-evident’, but downplay more experiential ways of knowing. Using examples from medieval monasticism and indigenous ontologies, Ingold explores more imaginative and open-ended ways of living where sacred texts or the land are considered dialogic, as conversations, not simply repositories to extract resources (2013). Likewise, challenges to narrowly defined historicism can provide ways to incorporate myths, memories, and even dreams, alongside empirical sources (Stewart 2017).

Relationships between landscape and people as conversations evoke the use of story as method in indigenous research. It draws out entanglements between formal histories, myth, memory, and experience (Kovach 2010; Smith 1999). Indigenous Australian storytelling (Santos-Granero 2005; Archibald, Bol Jun Lee-Morgan, and De Santolo 2019) and Native American yarnning (Anderson, Hamilton, and Barker 2018) both resist favouring objective

knowledge over more emotional ways of knowing. Modern magical practitioners and pagans do not constitute an indigenous group, but borrowing from Indigenous Methodologies can help dislodge conventional boundaries between realist and imaginal forms of knowledge. They can create space for apprehending spirits, through attention to heightened sensitivities that provoke engagement through expanded perception. As a holistic approach, stories, fictions, and experiences can be taken seriously, entangled with empirical histories.

Walking ethnographies attend to encounters with non-humans (Ingold and Vergunst 2008; Bates and Rhys-Taylor 2017). In addition to the usual flora and fauna, for magical practitioners who walk these hills, these may include inhabitants of more inspirited lands. They recount emotional and sensuous entanglements with other-than-human worlds, with *genii loci* or spirits of place. These are considered by some visitors to the museum as particularly ripe at three nearby sites, located in the valleys, the woods, along the river: the glen at the foot of a steep waterfall, the memorial stone at the edge of Minster churchyard, carvings behind a ruined nineteenth-century mill. All three are claimed as dimensions of the museum, and contribute to and reflect stories told in the collection. While they have slippery relationships with realist histories, these accounts embrace imaginal and experiential forms of knowledge as vital strands. The senses, emotions, stories, memories are valued as much, if not more, than empirical historical accounts. Potent possibilities for storytelling start with their proximity and entanglements with the museum and collection, and the founder, Cecil Williamson's active emplacement – through experience and story – of artefacts into the surrounding Cornish landscape.

### **The museum landscape as a conversational opening**

The Boscastle Museum of Witchcraft and Magic is at the centre of walks to Rocky Valley, St Nectan's glen, and Minster Wood. Many of the stories it tells are inspired by the sense of a magical landscape, and the collection motivates visitors to go out and walk. The founder, Cecil Williamson, explicitly evoked the surrounding land in his curation, including the labyrinths, and a general sense of west country folk magic. He opened the Museum of Folklore and Superstition on the Isle of Man in 1951, and on selling to Gerald Gardner a year or so later, returned to the mainland. Williamson described how he attempted to relocate in several places before settling in Boscastle, and set out his curatorial intentions in several publications (Williamson 2011 [1966]). He sold the museum to Graham King in 1996, who revised the displays, and developed the archive, library, and digital presence (King 2011). In 2013 King passed the collection to Simon Costin, director of the Museum of British Folklore who continues to update and develop the collection (Alexander 2020; Hannant and Costin 2016). It is a successful micromuseum with a global reputation (Candlin 2015), and its history has been well documented (Fox 2002; Patterson 2020; Phillips 2021).

The collection contains esoteric and ritual belongings from many twentieth and twenty-first century practitioners, as well as folk magic artefacts, often claimed to be the working tools of west country wise women. These are compelling for many visiting practitioners who seek ancestry through the practical skills of cunning folk. Williamson considered the folk witch, who he described as the Wayside Witch, as a holder of universal expert occult knowledge. He explained how

[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 (MWM doc 9838).

In this description, the scene is set for inspirational journeys into the surrounding landscape and world of spirit that generate attention and action, in conversation. In Williamson's

curation, folk magic was sometimes hidden in the shadows of sensationalist dioramas depicting ritual magic. However, many witches who had visited at that time reflect that the Wayside Witch was visible to those like themselves, who knew how to look, who were practiced at seeking out more inspired connections with the material world (Cornish 2022).

Williamson made a distinct effort to reinforce casual connections between magic, the collection and the locale. A sign on the museum exterior depicted the folk witch standing on Boscastle harbour ‘selling the wind’ to sailors, later reimagined by Cornish artist Vivienne Shanley.<sup>4</sup> Examples of wind spells are found in the collection, tightly knotted in lengths of rope. While there is no evidence that witches sold the wind here, on this harbour wall, it feels plausible, and encourages tales of sea witches and their abilities with watery elements. Cornish sea witch Kate (the gull) Turner is reputed to have sold the wind in this manner to sailors at Penryn, on the south-west Cornish coast (MWM doc 214). Folk magic skills are shown through domestic items, cauldrons, tea-cups, and brooms double up as working tools; found objects are repurposed as spirit houses; and potent energies are demonstrated through the display of stones, shells, sharks teeth. Williamson displayed a replica of the carved labyrinth at Rocky Valley and states that

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 7182).

Williamson deftly situates the museum in the Cornish land, and his evocation of a magical landscape provokes the senses and the possibilities of reciprocity and conversation. It makes the spirit world near.

Graham King took on the museum in 1996. He revised the displays and organised the collection into thematic narratives. Williamson’s voice remained vibrant through many of the

object labels, often lengthy biographies of esoteric objects and their human guardians: Old Hannah of Moretonhampsted listened to her eleven flint arrow heads, ‘fairy shot’, to make predictions (MWM 331); Kate (the Gull) Turner, sea witch of Penryn used a ‘talking tambourine’ and seashells as an aid to divination:

With it she made all kinds of readings and predictions, most of which concerned sea faring matters such as weather, fish catches and contracts for the carrying of cargoes. To operate, she would draw the fingers gently across the parchment on the underside of the tambourine so causing the sea shells to flutter, tremble and change their positions as set out on the red lines (MWM 214)

Williamson showed that things had temperaments and opinions of their own. For example, he reported that Granny Mann kept her relic in a secret place on Dartmoor, and responded to questions from her clientele with: ‘well me dear, I don’t rightly knows what I a do – till I have asked my friend. I’ll let thee know later’ (MWM 198). The museum’s remit is far broader than folk magic, and includes popular witchcraft, histories of persecution, modern Wicca and Western Mystery Traditions, and ritual magic groups such as the Golden Dawn. I found that for many practitioner visitors, their focus is the wise woman, and the accumulation of west country place names and folk magic conjure a sense of an enchanted west country topography through the collection (Cornish 2022).

King brought the shadowy Wayside Witch into the spotlight by building a Wise Woman’s cottage. The installation was constructed out large stones which had been thrown on to the harbour in a storm, literally bringing the outside into the interior. The cottage houses a life-like mannequin deep in concentration over a tarot spread, a crystal ball close to hand, and examples of folk magic from Williamson’s collection strewn around, such as jars of herbs, wind spells, and rowan crosses. Collections of found materials, sticks, twigs, leaves, stones, in particular protective hagstones (stones with a naturally formed hole), are tied

together and strung from a hook in the wall. The wise woman is presented as the possessor of a stable, continuous form of natural magic in the past, and as inspiration for more modern practices and traditions.

There is no clear lineage between historical wise women and today's magical-religious witches (Hutton 1999; Davies 2003). Nevertheless, the sense of practical heritage offered through the idiom of folk magic is powerful. It helps articulate claims to the past through practice and experience rather than the written record, where individuals have always explicitly engaged with the world of spirit, are experts in magical techniques, and take animated perspectives on the world. Often perceived as those who live in the margins, such as witches, shamans, seers, and druids. From this perspective, relationships to the past are constituted through experiential and sensory sources that inform the present, rather than explanations that privilege empirical evidence.<sup>5</sup>

Today, a small herb garden grows in the courtyard in front of the museum in a wooden raised bed. The plants invite visitors to recognise connections between herbal lore, folklore, and magical expertise, and the box is decorated with a wooden carving of a labyrinth emphasises proximity to a potent landscape, the carvings at nearby Rocky Valley. The changing window display reminds visitors of the turning seasons, and follows the Wheel of the Year festivals, often exhibiting local crafts such as corn dollies for the harvest festival of Lammas on August 1<sup>st</sup>.

I discuss walking from the museum along the coastal path, following the footpaths along the river, over the fields and into the woods. The landscape inside also deserves some attention. Steve Patterson recollects how his first visit to the museum in the 1980s, tracing the narrow, twisted path through the building evoked the dislocated sense of walking the labyrinth and generated a 'palpable manifestation of the uncanny' (2020: 34). Like the landscape, many new and returning visitors encounter the collection as active and spirited

(Cornish 2022). This is often echoed in their walking, in their pace and anticipation, some take hours to walk round slowly, pausing to study an object, or to read the accompanying information, walking back along the single route to revisit something, stopping to listen or focus attention. Sometimes visitors need some respite, finding the experience overwhelming and tiring, akin to a long walk.

(figure 5: Museum exterior, note the sign ‘Selling the Wind on Boscastle harbour’ and herb garden © Cornish 2021).

### **In conversation with animated landscapes**

While I refer to magical practitioners who walk these places as visitors and walkers, Wallis and Blain observe that pagans and witches often see themselves as pilgrims who return to sacred sites as places where they feel ‘at home’ (2009). Broader usage of ‘pilgrimage’ as a ‘meaningful personal and communal journey’ provides opportunities for emotional and spiritual reflection rather than as explicit religious action (Scriven 2021: 64; Frey 1998), or for heightened awareness of presence between space, place, and the body over the duration of walking (Slavin 2000). There are elements of pilgrimage in the walks I describe, but few explicitly used the term to describe their actions. Many walkers considered their visit to Boscastle, the museum, and the surrounding walks as a ‘homecoming’ that fostered senses of belonging and awareness of place and embodiment. The philosopher David Abram argues for a radical reconsideration of subjectivity and agency, and argues that embodied approaches to language and perception are always responses in place, reciprocal and aware (2010: 69; 2012). Abram’s arguments are made vivid in the light of the walks I took with Sarah.

Sarah and I walked to all three sites in a single day. She had been visiting the museum since the early 1990s, and aimed to visit a couple of times a year. While Sarah regularly

attended the Friends of the Museum events, she liked to spend time in the surrounding countryside and made time for walks out to the waterfall, labyrinths, and memorial stone. As we walked, I realised our verbal communication was not the only conversation in process. Sarah approached the elements and places as actively welcoming her return, the land and elements dynamic and full of spirit, and a recognition of ancestral spaces in a dynamic land. She drew on myths and folk tales about previous usage and inhabitants, speculative purposes and contested claims about empirical histories.

Memories of earlier museum visits and the museum collection were nodes that marked the landscape, the replica labyrinth, the account of Joan Wytte, conversations inspired by snippets told in object labels and in our responses to the objects. Senses of temporality, circular and nonlinear, were provoked by traces left in the landscape: in allegedly ancient monuments, through the movement of water carving out channels in the ground and noise in the air, or offerings left by others. Sarah's movement through the land engaged the imagination, not as fiction to be disregarded, but – along with senses and emotions – but actively, carrying reciprocal conversational patterns and responses.

Sarah and I set off from the museum at the end of the harbour where the river meets the sea. We climbed the foot of the steep hill that follows the South West coastal path. It is nearly always gusty on this high headland, and we pushed against the elements as we climbed the rocky path. We pass the White Tower<sup>6</sup> and see the coastline stretching ahead towards Tintagel. The path dips into valleys that rise steeply on the other side, the slate ground is sometimes slippery. The grass underfoot is short and tufty, and sporadic clumps of gorse follow the path. The occasional windswept hawthorn tree leans inland away from the sea. Sarah stops me in my tracks, urging me to pay attention to my surroundings. Listen, she says, hear the wind, listen to the birds and watch them ride the air. She reminds me to notice what it feels like to stand in the wind.

## *Rocky Valley*

Turning inland, we leave the craggy coastal path and the wild wind behind, and follow the path along the Trevillet River, verdant greenery on either side (figure 6 Rocky Valley © Cornish 2016). Tucked behind the ruins of Trewethett Mill are small labyrinths, petroglyphs, carved into the rockface (Saward J 2005; Saward, A 2001). They are unicursal routes, not mazes designed to befuddle or confuse (Bord 1976). The ground beneath our feet is worn and smooth, suggestive of those who have stood here before. Unlike the replica in the collection, an untouchable museum artefact, this one can be felt and stroked. Sarah stretches out her hand, which is a similar size as each carving, and shows me how to trace the single path, into the centre and out again. Her focus and attention to sensory perception between human and other-than-human offers an illustration for philosopher David Abram's radical reconsideration of subjectivity and agency that recognises sensory perception as an ongoing reciprocal interweavement (2010: 69, 2012).

Attached to the rockface above the carvings is a sign that declares the Rocky Valley Rock Carvings probably date from the early Bronze Age, and protected by the Ancient Monument Acts 1913-1953. The labyrinths had been spotted by Mr S J Madge in 1948 after dense undergrowth had been cleared across the valley (Saward, A 2001).<sup>7</sup> An article in *The Illustrated London News* fostered connections to other British prehistoric sites (Gibson 1954), although the while today archaeologists are cautious about claims to Neolithic origins (Nash 2008). Nash notes different tools and techniques were used to carve each one, and they have eroded since exposed to the weather (Nash 2007). At the time of walking, it had recently been proposed that one of the etchings was the work of the Serpent Cult, a documented

seventeenth-century Cornish occult group (Saward, A 2001). Labyrinths are recognisable symbols for meditation with the potential for transformation (Pennick 1990; Hume 2007).

(figure 7: Rocky Valley Labyrinths with Ancient Monuments sign © Cornish 2016)

Sarah is not particularly concerned about the contested origins and manufacture of the labyrinths. She says that this kind of contextual information can be interesting, and while keen to learn more about archaeological perspectives, these fall away when you are present in front of the carvings. Being present in front of the carvings heightens the experience, rather than testable data that can be organised according to archaeological categories. She considers it a place where boundaries between the world have been worn down by human attention; she feels this in her body, a sensory recognition of vibrant energies, outside of ordinary chronology. The single carved path acting as a portal. At that moment, it was not important to know which came first, the potent spot or the carvings. Her focus was on the tangible shapes, their effective, circular rhythms, which engaged the imagination, the senses, and the possibilities of transformation. Sarah's reflections here are akin to the sense of an expanded present found amongst modern witches and Pagans through dancing, meditation, and ritual making (Parmigiani 2019). Sarah asserted that if they were carved by the Serpent Cult in recent centuries, it intensified rather than undermined her sense that people returned here time after time, in search of earthly power. This is not a sense of stasis or claim to an unchanging history, but a more embodied sense of temporality that blurs linear timing or history.

The writer Susan Cross describes walking the megalithic tombs at Knowth, in Ireland, as part of an archaeological tour (2012). She notes that the guide's enthusiasm is marked by a preoccupation with data that downplays spiritual meanings. In response, she urges attention to the imagination. She reports conversations with ancestors, birds, and rocks: 'when the past speaks to the present, or spirit speaks to flesh, the message received often reveals more about the receiver than the sender' (Cross 2012). Cross writes about receiving messages that irrupt,

unexpectedly, into her experience. In her conclusion she notes these conversations are reciprocal, the land and its invisible inhabitants recognise her presence, as much as she recognises the land is neither empty nor without feeling.

Sarah stands in front of the labyrinth as sender and receiver, in active conversation with the seen and unseen world. Her eyes are closed as she traced the labyrinthine path etched into the rock, her body motionless in concentration, a general attuning to an awareness of spirit. Sarah's actions evoke Abrams' 'sense-making' as being in active conversation with an animated land (2012), recognised through the senses and emotions. Potential for transformation is apprehended by tracing the labyrinth – one finger, one path, following the route into the centre and back out again: as call and response. It is this repeated action over years, possibly centuries, that she considers has eroded the veil between the worlds.

### *St Nectans Glen*

After Rocky Valley we set off for St Nectan's Glen, where an eighteen metre waterfall plunges into a naturally formed basin (*kieve*) and bubbles out through a holed rock, into a shallow river bed, onwards down through the valley, past the labyrinths, towards the sea. We walked up the road towards Boscastle, turning right at Trethevy, past St Piran's church, following the river path against the flowing water. As we walked, Sarah anticipated how the waterfall and the glen would make her feel. We paid our entrance fee and climbed down slippery stone steps into the glen. Ritual offerings hang from the trees, and small cairns are built in the shallow water. These are considered votives by some visitors, but others are concerned about environmental degradation. Notices in the museum urged visitors to visit the waterfall and other sacred sites, but are warned not to light fires or leave 'inappropriate offerings.'

(figure 8: St Nectan's Glen © Cornish)

On the edge of the water, Sarah stood still and breathing deeply in the damp air, said this was a 'rich place' and she could feel the live atmosphere in her body. It demanded attention, and she urged me to notice the sound of water echoing round the wooded glen and the taste of water in the air. Sarah said, here, the veils between the worlds are thin, a place full of spirits, where the trees and rocks are vibrant and alive. Her engagement was embodied, sensory and alert, a conversation in action.

While visitors often asserted that St Nectans Glen has an almost continuous history of pilgrimage since Celtic Cornwall (as a generic and undefined period). There are plenty of origin myths that tell it is a significant, even sacred, space: it was the home of fifth century Saint Nectan, who built a hermitage, and who rang a bell to warn sailors of treacherous seas, heard nearly a mile away. These claims are not supported by the documentary record. The folklorist Ceri Houlbrook demonstrates that there are no traces of ancient sacred use. Instead she shows how these claims work through nineteenth- and twentieth-century romantic views of nature, the Celtic revival, New Age and Pagan sympathies (Houlbrook 2016). The creative elements of these stories are inspirational, but it is not a straightforward distinction between fiction and fact. While these should not be confused, expanded historicities can allow for embracing more imaginative and experiential elements, at the same time as recognising more empirical histories (Palmié and Stewart 2019).

Stories and storytelling are rich strands in a more holistic approach, as conversations in and with places. Lou Hart, witch, writer, and activist, considers being in the presence of wild water as a sacred interaction, and recalls a visit to the glen. She stood looking up at the water falling down and heard the waterfall sing: 'suddenly I can hear the high pitched singing sound. It is like three notes and I find myself humming the tune of it' (Hart 2012: 44). The

collective presence of inspirited water takes guardianship in the land, always in action, always in movement: in the relationship with the land and visitors.

Sarah was ambivalent about the lack of a documented history of pilgrimage to the glen, reflecting that people would have travelled here in wonder regardless of whether they recorded their journey or not. When standing in the cool shade with her feet in the cold water, her sense of spirit is embodied and emotional, unmeasurable by chronological time. She reminded me that swimming through the ring of the *kieve* is considered to have transformative effects as a form of rebirth, especially potent if carried out at midwinter. Sarah has done this, and described it as falling into a highly charged atmosphere. She felt accompanied by a palpable spirit presence with a reciprocal feeling of honour and protection: a sensory conversation through the watery and airy elements.

#### *Minster Wood and the memorial to Joan Wytte*

The third site is at the edge of Minster churchyard, a walk of about three miles from St Nectans Glen, and high on the hills behind Boscastle town. Situated between farmland and open heath, Minster Wood is an ancient broadleaf forest on the Valency valley. The small church was founded in the twelfth century, built on the site of a priory, dedicated to St Materiana, and a holy well still runs in the churchyard (Burnard 2007; OPC 2021). Just outside the perimeter fence, at the start of the footpath down the hill towards the Valency river is a memorial stone to Joan Wytte, an alleged witch who lived in Bodmin, Cornwall. It reads:

JOAN WYTTE

BORN 1772

DIED 1813

## IN BODMIN GAOL

BURIED 1998

NO LONGER

ABUSED

The top edge is carved with waxing, full, and waning moons: important symbols for modern Wiccans and witches. A well worn path leads to the memorial, and it was draped with local flora and offerings left by other visitors. Inside the museum, the life and death of Joan Wytte is told alongside biographies of documented Cornish cunning folk such as Tammy Blythe (Semmens. Across the internet, she is found in histories of famous witches and included in ghost tours of Bodmin Jail.<sup>8</sup> Her tale has been recounted through performances and publications (Wallis 2003; Jones 1999). Between the 1960s and 1997, the museum displayed what they claimed were the corporeal remains of Joan Wytte. A lengthy account of her life and death, and the events after her death, were provided by Williamson. She was known as the Fighting Fairy Woman of Bodmin. Her supernatural strength and her bad temper meant she had a reputation as a witch, but it was an assault on two grown men that landed her in prison, where she died of pneumonia. The identity of the skeleton is unquestioned, but Williamson offers a Home Office forensic expert to substantiate his story.<sup>9</sup>

In 1998 Graham King buried the bones in a wicca coffin along with the wires and bolts that had held them together. While the display of human remains in museums had become contentious (Jenkins 2010; Lohman and Goodnow 2006), it was reported that Joan was complaining. Visitors said she asked to be left in peace, and the coffin lid was often found shut in the mornings. A pivotal event in the decision to bury the skeleton was a consultation between Joan and Cornish wise woman Cassandra Latham. King gained permission to bury the bones just outside the perimeter fence of Minster churchyard, and

informed regional and national newspapers of the burial plans. Journalists applauded the sensitive repatriation of a tormented body (Gregory 1998; Garner 1998). The placement of a museum display into the ground adds to layered histories between the collection and the landscape. Now laid to rest, visitors say that she is now finally at peace, while the memorial stone has become a pilgrimage destination.

Despite the seemingly self-evident proof provided by the skeleton, Williamson's account is highly poetic, and unlikely to be literally true (Semmens 2010; Cornish 2013). While records are incomplete, there is no evidence of a woman imprisoned for assault or dying in Bodmin jail in the early nineteenth century (Johnson 2009). Prior to the 1832 Anatomy Act, the identities of cadavers were not recorded (Hallam 2016). There is no surety that the bones are all from one body.

As a conversation between past and present through experience and the imagination, Joan's role as a practical ancestor remains emotionally resonant. As we walked, Sarah and I discussed the scant evidence for the life and death of Joan Wytte, turning over storytelling, emotional connections, and empirical traces in turn. As the story travels beyond the museum and woods, it becomes sharpened by the power of story and it largely unquestioned. The life and death of this unrecorded witch has become established in popular Cornish witchcraft histories, despite the lack of an archival record. It is well understood that historical witchcraft accusations are often silenced, and combined with the power of storytelling, the sense of Joan is vivid. Inside the museum the story is related alongside images of well documented Cornish cunning women, *pellers*, such as Thomasine Blight without any hint of doubt. For many visitors, the story and the experience of walking crystalise Joan as an active presence.

Visiting the memorial stone takes on the quality of a regular kind of pilgrimage to offer respects to an ancestor. However, for witches the walk along the river and through the

woods is a journey taken through a live landscape. Practitioners walk through the valley, along the river and over the wooden foot bridge. As they climb the hill, many search for flowers, berries, fallen leaves, or twigs, seasonal offerings to lay at the memorial stone. In their search, they stretch their senses to gain awareness of other-than-human presences, and to acknowledge the liveness they walk through. There is an attention to movement, to their bodies, to the seasons and vegetation. While most walks are solitary or in small groups, for many years the Association of Friends of the Museum of Witchcraft followed their AGM with a walk to 'Joan's stone' in the cold winter air.<sup>10</sup> Events held in the spring would coincide with the wild garlic and bluebells that proliferate over the valley. It offered sociality through collective walking and a shared recognition of the value of Joan Wytte in their relationship to the museum, the collection, and the landscape. As an ancestral source, whether as a realist strand of witchcraft history or a recognisable museum exhibit now buried in the hillside, the walk to the memorial stone is intensified by the sense of an inspirited landscape held in common.

The holy well in the churchyard offered a second site, and walkers waited their turn to thank St Materiana, scoop a handful of cold water to wash their face before continuing on the shared walk up over the fields and back to the town. The surrounding greenery emphasises the sense of witchcraft as a form of natural magic, in connection with the elements. The location of the memorial stone, just outside the fence, adds to the sense of marginality and status as an outsider that is expected from someone known to be a witch and persecuted in life and abused in death.

In this way the imagination and sensory experience can be taken seriously. By taking up more sensory and experiential perspectives, the memorial stone works as a nexus. It offers a way to incorporate the presence of Joan's story, as an ancestral source, and as a way to understand the power of historical witchcraft for many practitioners. Through these kinds of

conversational approaches, Joan Wytte holds space to consider anxieties about the treatment of women and/as witches. Regardless of empirical ambiguity, she is recognised as one of the cunning folk identified in the museum collection, and realised through the Witch's Cottage display in its centre.

### **Conversational offerings: some concluding reflections**

My focus on sensory and emotional dialogues provoked through walking in spaces are material as well as conception or metaphorical. The collection and landscape are tangible, and the senses provoked by encounters with the natural world, and there is the material presence of souvenirs taken and deposits left behind at the sites and along the footpaths. Token deposits are provocative, considered by some as ritual litter, while archaeologists and heritage custodians have raised concerns about the destructive effect of nonbiodegradable offerings or the impact of relocating stones in the riverbed (Wallis and Blain 2003; Dallen 2012). In response to environmental concerns and develop a charter for good practice, Pagans set up the Ancient Sacred Landscape Network (ASLaN 1998), with a tag line of 'don't change the site, let the site change you'. Houlbrook reminds us that what counts as litter is always subjective, contextual, often conflicting (2022).

The number of offerings at these three sites has grown since my first visits in the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> When Sarah and I arrived at St Nectans Glen and climbed down to the riverbed, there were numerous clouties (rags) hanging from trees, small acts of sympathetic magic that works through decay and disintegration. We noted the piles of slate – faery stacks – balancing in the riverbed. Several years later a coin tree was established. Names and memories are

scrawled in chalk on slate. These days this practice has drifted down the headland and similar items are now found at Rocky Valley to mark visits to the labyrinths.

Not all the offerings are natural or biodegradable. In addition to the leaves and flowers collected on the journey through the wood toward Joan's memorial, offerings include seasonal baubles and plastic jewellery. At Rocky Valley and St Nectans Glen plastic trinkets, photographs, laminated cards and poems, are hung from trees and are propped on ledges, while tea-lights leave stains of dribbled wax. From an inspirited perspective, offerings play a part in relationships between places, people, and other-than-humans. For magical practitioners, they are not inert items offered to the land. They are animate and part of the world of spirit, actors in reciprocal conversations, inserted into the landscape as conversational gambits that make claims to presence and experience.

These conversations with the landscape, provoked by the collection and curatorial intentions in the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, traverse the paths, woods, and rivers outside, towards the three sites that span, web-like, from the museum and back again. They offer potential experiences with otherworlds and other-than-human spirits. Through a more reciprocal approach, they are encountered as potent dwelling places of *genii loci*, or where borders between worlds are worn down, or where ancestral spirits might reside. These more experiential approaches take the imagination seriously rather than disregard it as fiction. Where realist histories are recognised as problematic they continue to be woven through as sources of inspiration: falling in and out of conversation with inspirited places. Through this more experiential lens, history and temporarily can be dislodged from conventional chronology. Claims about presence challenge linear relations of past, present, and future as the imagination takes hold in conversations with the land, where empirical histories have to take their place amongst more sensory and emotional ways of knowing.

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<sup>1</sup> While each site can be reached by car, there is still some walking to reach the site: across the churchyard; into the glen; and along a narrow river path.

<sup>2</sup> This claim downplays early industrialisation, seafaring, and migration (Hale 2001) and heightens the role played by romantic and marginalised tales (Orange and Laviolette 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The data I discuss in this article was collected through participant observation as one strand of my doctoral fieldwork. While my ethnographic research primarily took place between 2000-2003, I have maintained a long term research relationship with the museum and the curatorial team.

<sup>4</sup> Vivienne Shanley was commissioned by Graham King to paint the turning Wheel of the Year museum installation that illustrates the eight-spoke Wiccan ritual calendar that combines solar markers with folk rites and agricultural tasks in a seasonal cycle.

<sup>5</sup> Challenges to conventional forms of historicism are familiar in ethnographic approaches to history that address such as Michael Lambek's *The Weight of the Past* (2003). As Charles Stewart demonstrates in *Dreaming and Historical Consciousness in Island Greece* (2017), expanded approaches to European historicities also test dominant forms of history making.

<sup>6</sup> The White Tower was built as a summer house in 1827 by local landowner Thomas Avery. It was standing empty in 2001, and now it is a Coast Guard look out and visitor centre.

<sup>7</sup> That the labyrinths were revealed after the ground was cleared adds to the sense of an ancient monument rediscovered, although they are close to the derelict mill that was working

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up until at least the 1830s (Saward 1964). Nevertheless, in Wilkie Collins' guidebook of 1851 he follows the footpath inland from the coast in search of the waterfall, but while he notes the mill, the way is impenetrable due to the mass of vegetation (Collins 1851).

<sup>8</sup> See the Bodmin Jail tour, Jail, Bodmin (2022). 'Walking With Witches.' *Bodmin Jail Blog*: 05 September, 2022 <https://www.bodminjail.org/blog/paranormal/walking-with-witches/>.

Websites such as Kemp, Charlotte Iowe (2020). 'A Witch buried on Halloween - 185 years after her death (Joan Wytte, Minster Church).' *Paranormal Hauntings Blog*: 24 October 2020 <https://paranormalhauntings.blog/2020/2010/2024/a-witch-buried-on-halloween-2185-years-after-her-death-joan-wytte-minister-church/>. Joan's story can be found on YouTube and

TikTok, for example: @ghostadventuresofcornwall (2020). 'Joan Wytte the Cornish Witch Shows Herself and Speaks to Me.' *Ghost Adventures of Cornwall, YouTube Channel*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LT9cCAAwQU> .

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[https://www.tiktok.com/@thesehauntedhills/video/6995669534476668166?is\\_from\\_webapp=v6995669534476668161&item\\_id=6995669534476668166](https://www.tiktok.com/@thesehauntedhills/video/6995669534476668166?is_from_webapp=v6995669534476668161&item_id=6995669534476668166) .

<sup>9</sup> Williamson reported that a forensic examination confirmed the bones contained high levels of kaolin and fluoride. This supported his account of an eighteenth-century leatherworking family living near Scarlett's Well in Bodmin. There is no copy of the forensic report in the museum archive.

<sup>10</sup> The Friends of the Museum was set up informally in 1997, meeting twice a year for social events and expert talks. The Friends gained charitable status and a formal structure after the Boscastle flood in 2004, and was replaced in 2022 with a new Patron system.

<sup>11</sup> I presented a paper on these sites at the ASA conference (Association of Social Anthropology) in Durham in 2005. An audience member who had grown up nearby in the

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1970s recalled the glen was freely available to walk through and he had no recollection of any deposits being left.