





Forests of the mind

Haven in troubled times or lair of magic and monsters, the forest beguiles and frightens in equal measure. **Eleanor Barraclough** explores our relationship with the deep dark wood through legends old and new

Illustration: **Lucille Cero**

Once upon a midsummer night, a man with a donkey's head wandered through the woodland glades, and stumbled upon a sleeping fairy... In the birch woods of northern Scotland lived the lonely Ghillie Dhu, clothed in green moss and leaves... In the shadow of a magical castle was a dark forest, and in that forest lurked hippogriffs, centaurs, werewolves and an enchanted Ford Anglia...

From Shakespearean plays to Harry Potter novels, from medieval Arthurian romances to Tolkien's Middle Earth, forests and woodlands have a particular hold over the imagination. They have always held a special place in the human psyche, as somewhere to escape to, to run from, or meet mysterious beings. There's a sense that the forests don't belong to mere

mortals. In the shadowy undergrowth, the gnarled and twisted branches, the night-time hoots and shrieks, the mind plays tricks, sees shapes, conjures creatures from the darkness.

The British Isles have more than their fair share of forest folk tales, but they're not alone. Across the North Sea, the forests of Scandinavian folklore are populated with grizzled trolls, beautiful spirits with cow tails, and Yggdrasil: the mighty world tree of pagan Norse mythology. Thanks to the Grimm Brothers, German forests crawl with little girls clad in red hoods and witches in gingerbread cottages.

Travel further east and you might stumble across the shape-shifting Leshy who stalks the Slavic woodlands with his wolves and bears, luring travellers from the path. If you manage to outwit him (he's partial to offerings of salt, >

milk and bread) then all you have to worry about is the witch Baba Yaga, lurching through the Russian forests in a hut on chicken legs. But the woodlands and forests of the imagination are more than tall travellers' tales and the remnants of old fireside stories. Through them, humans make sense of the world around them, construct their identity, remember the past.

THE CREATION OF LEGENDS

For the Romans, the barbarian northern lands beyond the empire were characterised by dense, ancient forests. These trackless wastes were the antithesis of civilisation, an attitude that was only strengthened at the cataclysmic Battle of Teutoburg Forest in 9AD, when an alliance of Germanic tribes ambushed and wiped out three entire Roman legions.

According to Pliny the Elder, 30 years after the Roman occupation of Britain, their knowledge of these islands still extended no further than the Caledonian Forest. Where exactly Pliny was referring to isn't clear. Today, only remnants of Scotland's ancient pine forest survive, most within the Cairngorms National Park.

Fast-forward a few centuries to the Middle Ages, and this same Caledonian Forest was said to be where King Arthur fought one of his 12 battles. It may also be the location of a medieval Welsh poem – *Cad Goddeu, The Battle of the Trees* – which tells the tale of the magician Gwydion, who enchants the trees and makes them march into battle:

Alder, front of the line,
Formed the vanguard
Willow and Rowan
Were late to the fray...

SHAKESPEAREAN FANTASY

Several centuries later, things might have turned out differently for Shakespeare's Macbeth if he had known that Scottish trees could be conjured from the ground: the bard's greatest tragedy pivots on the prophecy that Macbeth can't be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. He retorts: 'That will never be. / Who can impress the forest, bid the tree / Unfix his earthbound root?' Unfortunately for Macbeth, the prophecy comes to pass when soldiers march on his castle shielded with tree branches.

Birnam Wood has a decidedly supernatural role in the Scottish play, but the actual location was real enough. Only one tree – the Birnam Oak – still survives from Shakespeare's time, its enormous branches propped up with wooden crutches on either side.

Shifting from tragedy to comedy, the Forest of Arden is the most famous Shakespearean forest, a green leafy stage for desperate lovers and political outcasts. In *As You Like It*, Orlando carves messages of love on the trees themselves, while Duke Senior, banished from court, flees to the forest 'and a many merry men with him, and there they live like the old Robin Hood of England'. Once again, fantasy blends with reality, Shakespeare drawing inspiration from the French Forest of Ardennes as well as Warwickshire's Forest of Arden that lay on his doorstep.

Today, only pockets of the forest remain, and even by Shakespeare's time the wooded landscape was in decline. A medieval stone marker, the Coughton Cross, still stands at

what was the edge of the forest; according to local tradition, this was where travellers would offer up prayers of protection as they made their way into the woods. In other Shakespearean woodlands, supernatural

creatures lurk – poor Bottom, the aspiring thespian, ends up with a donkey's head and an unshakable lovelorn fairy queen – but real-life forest travellers may well have had worse to fear than impish Pucks.

Not all exiles and outlaws were as upstanding as Duke Senior, or even the legendary Robin Hood with whom he was compared. The 18th-century highwayman Dick Turpin began his life of crime in Epping Forest, as part of a notorious Essex gang of poachers and thieves. But in the popular imagination, the forest-dwelling outlaws often became worthy subjects of tales and ballads, set up as popular heroes against the oppressive ruling classes.

When the Normans arrived in 1066, they set aside large tracts of land for royal hunting, placing them under Forest Law. Within the Royal Forests, penalties for illegal hunting were severe, and social tensions ran high. Composed in the early 1300s, the *Song of Trailbaston* tells of an outlaw living in the forest: an early form of political protest against the authorities: 'For this reason I will keep myself within the

“The witch Baba Yaga lurches through the Russian forests in a hut on chicken legs”



woods, in the beautiful shade; There is no deceit there, nor any bad law...'

Forests and woodlands have lost none of their imaginative potency today. The forests of Tolkien's Middle Earth variously contain nature-spirits such as Tom Bombadil and Goldberry, as well as giant spiders, elves and the eco-wizard Radagast the Brown. The ancient Forest of Fangorn is home to the Ents: towering, tree-like shepherds of the woods that march to battle like the enchanted trees of Welsh legend.

Elsewhere, in JK Rowling's Harry Potter series, the Forbidden Forest is a dark, dangerous space outside the safe walls of Hogwarts, crawling with giant spiders, unpredictable mythical creatures, and he-who-must-not-be-named, Voldemort himself. Yet when the security of the castle is breached, the heroes must flee to the forest itself, and seek help from its supernatural inhabitants. And for

“In popular imagination, forest-dwelling outlaws became worthy subjects of tales and ballads”

younger readers acquainted with *The Gruffalo* picture books, a heroic mouse takes a stroll through the deep, dark wood and encounters a series of threatening forest-dwelling creatures, both real and monstrous.

A walk in the woods today is a walk through time and space: through centuries of history, accompanied by characters real and imagined, human and non-human. Through the folk tales handed down in childhood, tall tales of outlaws and fairies, we inherit shared cultural memories that tell us what to expect from the forest: mystery and magic, shelter and adventure, and potential danger lurking around every shadowy clump and gnarled stump. While the roots of these memories go very deep, new roots are still forming, and it's all the more thrilling for that. **CF**

3 In a series of Essays on BBC Radio 3, Eleanor explores more fictional forests; 10.45pm, 15-19 October.



Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough is a lecturer in medieval history and literature at Durham University. She is the author of *Beyond the Northlands: Viking Voyages and the Old Norse Sagas* (OUP).

FIVE FABULOUS FORESTS TO EXPLORE

1 COED FELINRHYD, WALES

Dubbed the 'Celtic Rainforest', Snowdonia's ancient woodland dates back 10,000 years to the last Ice Age and is home to rare plant and animal species, such as the lesser horseshoe bat and 'tree lungwort' lichen. It is also in the Mabinogion – a medieval collection of Welsh tales and legends – as the last resting place of Pryderi, King of Dyfed, who was killed by the magician Gwydion. A trail now runs through the forest courtesy of the Royal Geographical Society.

2 KIELDER FOREST PARK, ENGLAND

Compared with its ancient counterparts, Kielder Water & Forest Park is barely out of nappies. This Northumbrian landscape of Sitka spruce, Douglas fir and Scots pine may be the largest forest in England, but it was only established in 1926 as a timber reserve. Home to roe deer, ospreys and red squirrels, Kielder also has a visual art and architecture collection, including a Minotaur Maze. Its skies are also England's darkest, perfect for the stunning Kielder Observatory.

3 CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK, SCOTLAND

Home to remnants of the Caledonian Forest that once covered much of Scotland in Scots pine, juniper, birch, aspen and rowan. Many thousands of years ago, it was inhabited by aurochs, elks, wild boars, lynxes, brown bears, grey wolves and wild horses. While these animals have long since vanished from the forest, it's still home to rare species, including mountain hares, red squirrels, Scottish wildcats and golden eagles.

4 SAVERNAKE FOREST, ENGLAND

Savernake became a Royal Forest – an area of woodlands and pastures set aside for royal hunting – following the Norman conquest of 1066. Once the family estate of Jane Seymour, Henry VIII's third wife, Savernake is now home to hundreds of 'veteran trees': ancient beeches and oaks with names such as 'Big Bellied Oak' and 'Spider Oak'. Tales say the trees are jostling for space with departed spirits: a headless horsewoman, unlucky black hounds and the ghost of a white deer.

5 SLIEVE GULLION FOREST PARK, NORTHERN IRELAND

Follow in the footsteps of mythical hunter-warrior Fionn Mac Cumhaill (Finn McCool); legendary heroes don't come with better names than his. Forest trails lead to the slopes of Slieve Gullion mountain: at the summit is the lake where Fionn was said to be transformed into an old man by witch Calliagh Berra, and a Neolithic tomb known as Calliagh Berra's House. Children can explore Giant's Lair, an art trail inspired by the forest's legends.



