

The night-time “Witch-walks”

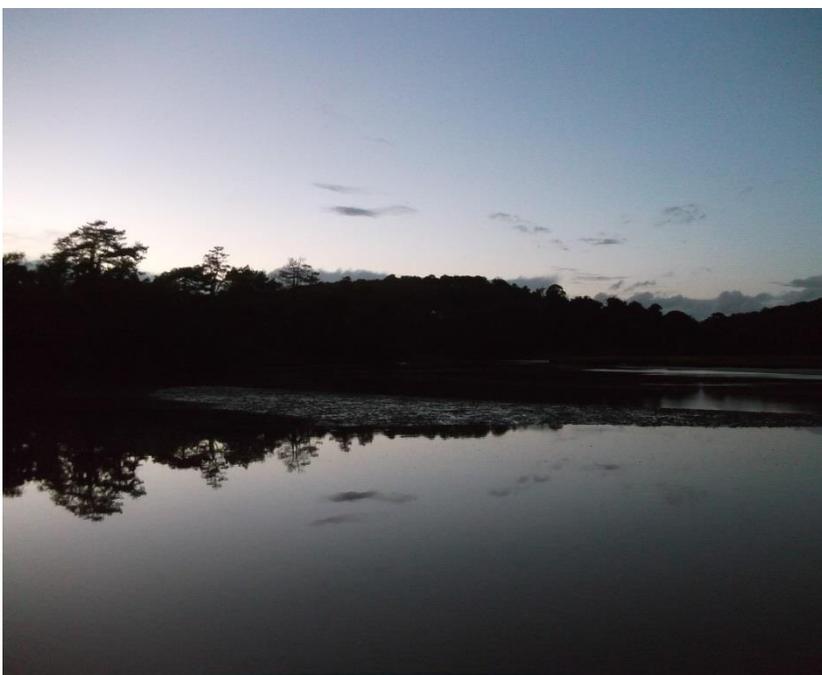
At the Port Eliot Festival 28-30th July 2017

For the third year running the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic had a presence at The Port Eliot Festival in the form of the Night-time “Witch-Walk” around the site at 10-11pm on the Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights, facilitated by myself (Steve Patterson) and Binky Andrews.

The festival is held on the port Eliot Estate at St Germans tucked away in a hidden corner of east Cornwall. The estate grounds are a perfect place for a festival; on one side bounded by the river Tiddy and the other a maze of woodland glades and tracks. In the middle is situated the old manor house, the ancient church of St Germans and the rolling gardens designed by Humphry Repton in the C19.



The Eliot family have been in possession of the estate for over 500 years from when they bought the lands after the dissolution of the monasteries for the princely sum of £500. It was however, the lord of the manor Peregrine St Germans, who started the festival. Although they were of an old aristocratic lineage they were by no means a ‘buttoned-up’ conservative family. His parents lived a jet set lifestyle between London and Monaco, hanging out in the Mediterranean with the likes of Edward and Mrs Simpson. Lord Peregrine himself was a colourful character and part of the Etonian bohemian counterculture set of the 1960s. In 1981 he started the now legendary Elephant Fayres, which ran for 6 years. They were very much part of the old school of Free Festivals; being an anarchic mix of music, theatre, radical politics, mind expansion and counter culture. Unfortunately they became too anarchic and came to an end. In 2004 it was reinvented as the Port Eliot Literary festival and it is still running today.



Clockwise from top left - The grounds, inside the house, the Norman door of the church and the Tiddy.

Unlike many festivals, at Port Eliot, the emphasis is not on the big named bands, but on hosting a bewildering array of talks, performances and workshops. The music and performances are always far removed from the mainstream. In short, it is an ideal place for spreading the word about the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic. There are even areas dedicated to art, fashion, cookery, and literature. If you cast caution and expectation to the wind you can stumble upon any number of unexpected gems. I love it!

The old free festivals were on a much smaller scale than the festivals of today. There were no big bands or promoters and absolutely no press coverage. They were about as unfashionable as you could get and were entirely entrenched in the underground counter culture, but their influence was disproportionately huge. (And as with the sex Pistols first gig, everyone claims to have been there!) One went there to both 'party' and to expand your consciousness.

In them days there was no coverage of countercultural ideas in mainstream culture, festivals were one of the few places one could go to expand one's mind. It was at the free festivals that I first came across Paganism and radical Green Politics. I feel proud that the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic has entered in to this tradition, passing it on to a new generation of festivals.

The Night "Witch-walks" involve about an hour's walk around the festival site in which I share some folkloric tales connected with the place. I usually start with a short talk about the museum. When Cecil Williamson first landed in Cornwall in the 1950s, he lived not far from the festival site in Polperro and had museums in both Polperro and Looe. Presumably much of his early collection of folk magic from the old sea witches and the 'aunty may's' must have been in this area. It's not hard to keep bringing the folkloric tales back to the museum.

As well as promoting the Museum I have always felt that Folkloric walks are an ideal way of putting folklore across. Folklore is primarily a spoken/enacted tradition; it can never fully come to life if it is just written upon a page. Speaking the old stories whilst walking through the landscapes from whence they were born somehow seems to conjure them in to being. In our society we have not only lost many of our story telling skills, but also our listening skills. Story walks are one of the few environments where one can tell the old stories and people remain engaged. I also strongly believe that when one marries the folk story with the landscape from whence it came a strange alchemy emerges; the spirit of place becomes more evident and we become more connected to the land. Folklore, myths and legends need not always be set in a dim and distant land; wherever we are there is always some folk tale or practice lurking around the corner.



Mud and sunshine at the festival.



My introduction to storytelling once again came from the old free festivals where there was always a storytelling tent. One of my great influences was Robin Williamson, I loved the way he would never tell a tale all the way through in one go, but he would jump around from one to the other, tying them all up at the end. I tend to mix up the stories with talks on the nature of folklore, the folklorists and nuggets of local history. When I first started story telling I used to script my talks, now I tend to memorise the key points and improvise as I go along. That is the beauty of walking and talking; it becomes a dialogue rather than a monologue as you begin to respond to the people and the landscape around you ...and the universe is always ready to throw in a wild card in to the game just to shake things up!

When something crazy happens, I try to go with it and incorporate it in to the act. Last year the paraffin lamp I was using blew up in my hand. I told the group that it was a ghost detector set to do that if there was a spirit presence in the aria. This year, whilst recounting the tale of “Dando and the devil” (a folk tale collected in the 19C which was actual set in the grounds of the port Eliot estate), at the point in the tale that the bad friar Dando demands a drink from his companions and the devil steps forward disguised as a dark handsome member of his company, a young muscled gentleman, stripped to the waste, burst from the woods behind us and gave me a tin of cider saying “I heard you calling for a drink”. He had no idea that there was a story in progress but he was a great sport and played along, right up to the point where the devil galloped of with Dando’s soul down to the river, where he too galloped of in to the night. I solemnly warned the group that if you mess with folklore – folklore will mess with you! ...and I was getting a little nervous about the next part of the walk where we start talking about piracy!



Psychodelia from Bahrain and shamanic pagan processions from Kernow.

There is a certain element of performance in running talk/walks, but I am not an actor and I keep props to a minimum and never dress up. I personally have an aversion to “Living history” performances which often feel they tend towards the intrusive. I also feel that much of

the power of the old folk tales lays in the irony of their extraordinary presence in our ordinary lives; the more theatrical one makes them, the less impact they have ...and the less we use our imagination.

On the night “Witch-walk”, after talking about the museum, I then went on to speak of the Folklore of the surrounding landscape and of how Cornwall was once a separate country with its own Kings and Queens and own language. I told tales of the pirates, smugglers, ghosts, saints and fairy folk that once frequented the place. Every night I was fully booked, but as I walked, like the pied piper of Hamlyn I gathered as many as 40 people. Much of our route was ill lit and on rough ground, Binky followed up the rear; handing out leaflets, lighting the way, navigating hazards, rounding up stragglers and offering pastoral support. On Saturday the rain was persistent and much of the site turned to a sea of mud. In the afternoon we had to re-route the walk twice to keep up with where was passable, but I thought no one in their right mind would come out and brave the elements in a night like this. Amazingly 13 brave souls came out and did the walk to its end. There was a real spirit of adventure amongst us and we had a great time.

At our journey's end by the river, I finish the walk with a talk about the magic and witchcraft in the area. We were lucky to have three collectors of folk magic in east Cornwall; Jonathan Couch, William Paynter and (of course!) Cecil Williamson. On Sunday the weather turned once again and we were blessed with a beautifully sunny day. On the final evening the sky cleared and behind us the starry heavens were reflected in the waters of the Tiddy. As I turned the Bull-Roared and conjured up the spirit of the land a shooting star fell from Cassiopeia. As everyone went their separate ways when the walk was done I felt as if a little piece of West Country magic had fallen in to our lives.



The night “Witch-walk” - In search of the folklore of the land.



“The folklore, Myth, and Magic around east Cornwall and port Eliot” by Steve Patterson as a limited edition booklet produced especially for the event. If you are interested I am sure the Museum of Witchcraft and magic could furnish you with a copy for the princely sum of £7.50.

(The booklet is independently produced in association with a promotional event for the museum of Witchcraft and magic, but may not necessarily reflect the views of the management.)

The Folklore, Myth

And

Magic

around East Cornwall

and

Port Eliot



Stephen J Patterson



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