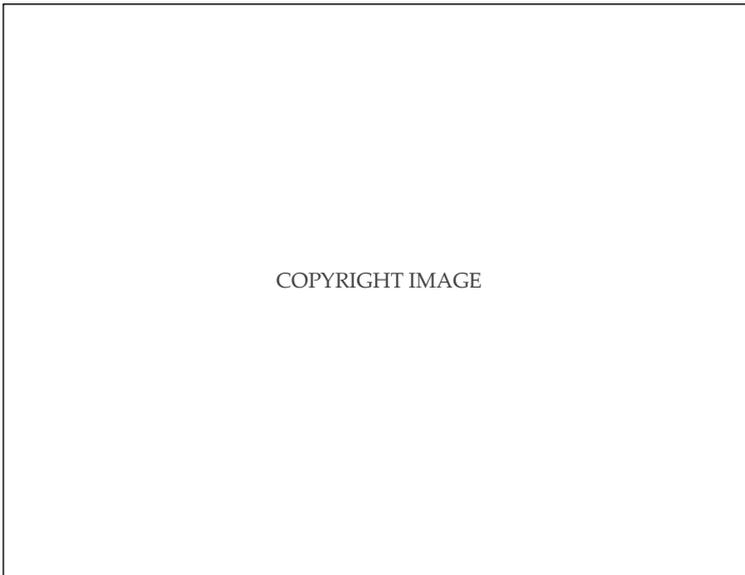


## 2 Susan's Story

The Swaffers succumbed to the *pestilential vapours* of the marshes during Lent in 1607. It was *a great shake of sickness which Swaffer's wife and her husband and her child had*, according to George Taylor—an evocative description which leaves little doubt as to what they were suffering from. The *shaking ague* was a common term for it. Uncontrollable shivering and extreme cold are the initial symptoms of malaria, after which the victim's temperature shoots up and the body is wracked by fever. Heavy sweating brings the temperature down to normal, and there is then a respite until the next fit, a couple of days later. The Swaffers were likely to have been worse affected than most people, for

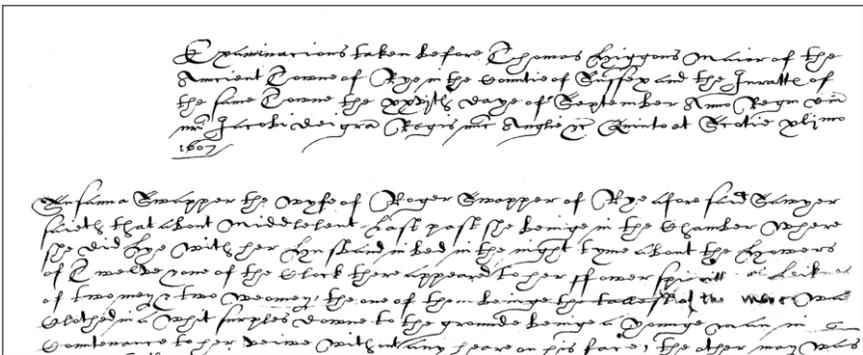
fresh-incomers...run a great risk, who having been brought up and accustomed to a clear healthy air, remove to fenny, wet, sickly soil; for people born in, and inured to bad air, bear it much better

as was noted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



A fair held on the frozen Thames in the winter of 1607-8.

The tail end of winter was the worst time for the poor—fatalities from fever were at their highest, and even the rich took medicines to prevent them getting ill. And winters were colder then—the winter of 1607-8 was particularly cold, when the Thames froze in London, and a fair was held on the ice. These were the lean months when the cows were giving little milk and the hens had stopped laying. Cheese and eggs were the staples of the poor (apart from bread and beer)—the prohibition on eating meat during Lent would have been of little significance to those who could not afford to buy it. If the Swaffers came to Rye because of a downturn in their fortunes, they must now have felt that they had hit rock bottom.



Susan Swaffer's first examination [Rye 13/1]

It was one night when the Swaffers were lying *sick a bed together* (as Roger put it), in the chamber where they usually lay, that Susan had her vision. The time was between midnight and one a'clock—the most likely time (apart from noon) for spirits to appear. Perhaps it was during a spell of high fever, delirious, that she became aware of the presence in the room of two men and two women. She described their appearance in detail. The tallest man wore *a white surplice down to the ground, being a young man in countenance (to her view), without any hair on his face*—so possibly a minister of the church, or student. *The other man was a short thick man clothed all in white, with a satin doublet and breeches pinked [studded with holes] and a long grey beard*—a very rich and fashionable older man. One of the women was clothed with a green petticoat and a white waistcoat [jacket, not sleeveless], with a rail [kerchief] about her neck, and a white kerchief upon her head—a young woman, to her judgment. This woman was lower in status than the men. The other was a young woman likewise,

clothed all in white. This was a grand company to grace a poor woman's chamber!

The next day Susan told her landlady, Anne Taylor, about them. She must have felt reassured that this woman lived next door, because she and her mother, old Widow Bennett, were reputed to have healing skills. When Anne heard the tale, she wanted to know if Susan had been dreaming, and asked her

*Whether she were a wake or a sleep when they did appear unto her? and she said She was awake, and then Mistress Taylor willed her to Call upon god, for that they were illusions which she had seen.*

Good protestant advice—they were illusions created by the devil.

The spirits appeared again to Susan over the next three nights. If she did *call upon god*, it had no effect. Their repeated appearances must have seemed increasingly ominous—did they have a message, or a warning for her? Were they ghosts who needed to unburden themselves of some hidden knowledge before they could rest—a murder or theft, or a legacy that had been withheld, or buried treasure? Whatever type of secret it was, people feared the need of the dead to make contact with the living—their refusal to let go of this world. The Catholic church had tried to limit the wanderings of ghosts by consigning them to purgatory—but neither then, nor since purgatory had been officially abolished by the protestants, could popular fears be corralled into the neat categories of clerics.

After the third night, Anne advised Susan to speak to the spirits with these words:

*In the name of the father, son and the holy ghost, wherefore come you to trouble me, or what will you have?*

If they were evil spirits, calling on God would hopefully scare them away, while if they were ghosts or other types of spirit with a message, it would invite them to divulge why they had appeared (Anne did not specifically tell Susan to ask *who or what* the spirits were, which was the more usual



A woman wearing kerchiefs

approach, to ascertain whether they were good or evil). But it required courage and a strong faith in God to challenge apparitions. Even Parliamentary Commissioners during the Civil War were described as *bold* when they addressed an extremely noisy and violent spirit in this way.

On the fourth night the spirit-woman in the green petticoat did eventually speak to her. Her words were threatening:

*'Sue, come and go with me, or else I will carry thee!'*

Whereupon [she] being affeared with that vision, and the calling of her by her name, called to her husband, and waked him, and *willed him to hold her.*

And he awaking turned unto her, and answered her

*'Wherefore should I hold thee?'* and she replied unto him again and said

*'Here is a thing that will carry me away!'*

As she was thus calling out in fear to her husband, another of the spirits

... took hold of her by the arm and gripped her. And ...her arm was lame by reason thereof two days, that she could not help herself.

This was 'spirit Richard', who was the tall young man who wore a surplice. Susan could provide the names of the others as well, which were Robert, Margery and Catherine. Perhaps spirit Richard was punishing her for seeking her husband's help. Roger, however, was totally oblivious:

And he said again unto her,

*'I see nothing'*, and so turned about from her.

And then the ... vision, which she so did see, departed from her. And afterwards the same night, a little before day, the ... two men and two women app[ea]red] unto her in form as they were before.

This time Susan plucked up the courage to speak.

*'In the name of the father, the son and the holy ghost, what will you have me do?'*

Not quite the same question as Anne had suggested, but it seems to have been the right one to ask, because the spirits had a curious task for her. The woman in the green petticoat said to her:

*'I would have you go unto young Anne Bennett, and call her, and go into her garden with her, and dig and set sage; and then you should be well.'*

It seems that the spirit was promising to cure Susan of her illness by getting her to plant sage cuttings! *Young Anne Bennett* was none other than Anne Taylor, *Bennett* being her maiden name, and 'young' because her mother, Widow Bennett, was also called Anne, and lived in the same house.



*How can a man die who has sage in his garden?* The ancient saying overstates the point, but sage was indeed considered to be a cure-all. More pertinently, sage was thought to be a febrifuge, and Susan was probably taking it for her ague—a Sussex remedy requires you to eat sage leaves nine mornings in succession while fasting. Perhaps Susan felt that anything to do with sage might help her illness—even just planting sage cuttings.

\* \* \*

The account thus far of the events of the previous four nights has been Susan's. Roger's recollection was rather different. He had been unaware of his wife's visions at first, until woken by his wife calling him and saying that a spirit was threatening to carry her away. He could not see the spirits, but he had done his best to help, and had even suffered for it:

he did take hold of his wife and lay his arm over her, but did [not] see nor hear anything; [but] that hand which he did lay over his wife was so benumbed and lame, that he could not help himself there with.

And [...] Mistress Taylor by the space of two days together did cut [Roger's] bread, for that she was daily at his house.

So while the couple were suffering the effects of the spirits' spite, Anne came daily to attend on them, and was clearly very interested in the spirits. On one occasion she came round to the Swaffers' house with her mother, and Roger overheard Susan telling them about more specific threats from the spirits:

Two spirits in the likeness of two women did appear unto her that night, and...they said

*They would carry her away and lay her under an appletree in Mistress Taylor's garden...*

—as if she were going to be *buried!* The spirits' meaning was not as threatening as it seemed, however, for they then revealed news of a most interesting kind:

*The Story*

The spirits did certify her that *there was money hid under the appletree near unto the summer house, and that they did mean to bring Mistress Taylor unto her in the said garden.*

So the spirits, Roger said, had come to tell Susan where treasure was buried. Anne now reassured her that

*She should fear nothing, for [the spirits] would not hurt her. And that if they required her again to go with them, she should go.*

She had abandoned the idea that these were devilish illusions, and now took a more positive view of them.

Anne was clearly considered to be an expert in dealing with spirits. Such *wisewomen* or *cunningfolk* (from *con*, know) were consulted not only on medical matters, but also on divining the whereabouts of buried treasure and lost or stolen goods, identifying a thief, and providing love potions. What linked these apparently disparate functions was the ability to conjure spirits, talk with the fairies, or have some other means of accessing the spirit world. Many *cunningfolk* claimed to get their knowledge from the fairies. Dr. Faustus was not the only person to believe that knowledge—*cunning*—was something you got as much from spirits as from books.

\* \* \*

Anne Taylor does not seem to have taken exception to the spirits' suggestion that Susan should dig in her garden, or to the curiously insulting way in which this was expressed—referring to her as *young Anne Bennett*. As the wife of a gentleman, she deserved the title of *Mistress*, and was also married with two children.

The next day (in Susan's words):

In the afternoon after dinner, Mistress Taylor did pull open two pales [from the fence between their two gardens], and sent for [Susan]. And so they went both together into the garden, and [she] did dig in the garden with Mistress Taylor.

And Mistress Taylor did thrust a spit into the ground where they did dig, and they heard a sound. And [Susan] being very sick, could stay but a very little space, but departed away without settinge any sage.

Susan is still referring to *setting sage*, but they were clearly doing something quite else. At the back of her mind may have been the thought that what they *ought* to have been doing in the garden at this time of year was planting sage cuttings (so said the author of the first English gardening manual). This was an essential task for cunningfolk, who grew a great deal of sage, not just the odd plant.

But Mistress Taylor said (at the thrusting in of the spit the first time)  
*It was there when they heard the sound.* And she thrusting in the spit the second time so far as she could, said  
*It was in vain to dig, for now it is farther off.*  
And also the same time Mistress Taylor went into the Summer house, and did take up a stone, and thrust in the spit. And so departed without digging any farther, but put in the earth in the place again where she digged.

Could *setting sage* be a euphemism for digging for buried treasure?

\* \* \*

The existence of treasure was not news to everyone, for Roger reported that:

Mistress Taylor [said]...that she  
*Did know that there was money hid in her garden, and also did know where the same did lie*

There had in fact been at least two attempts to dig for treasure in the garden already, though Susan and Roger only heard of these later. The first was made by a former tenant of the house which the Swaffers now occupied, a Robert Pywall. A tailor called Philip Williams who had done some gardening for the Taylors also claimed that Anne had asked him to dig for treasure there, but he had refused.

Robert Pywall had been hired by George Taylor to make them a garden and orchard—this must have been not long after their marriage in 1603, when George had moved into the house. Pywall, being *greatly troubled in the night with treasure that should be hid in [the Taylors'] garden near unto the summer house* (George's words, when questioned on the subject, which were echoed by Anne), had asked *for the satisfying of his mind, that he might dig in his garden to search for the [treasure]*. George agreed (insisting in his examination that he had *not* hired him to dig for treasure).

Anne said that one of the symptoms of Susan's illness was (like Pywall's problem) being *troubled with treasure*, for which the cure—so Susan told her—was to *go and dig in [Anne's] garden, and then she should be well*. Perhaps we can imagine Susan, whilst wracked by the shaking ague, also tormented by the thought that there might be money in the next-door garden, there for the taking. It was Susan alone who did the digging, in Anne's account, but she was not successful—she *could find nothing but stones, neither did she hear any sound of any thing but as a stroke upon a stone*. Anne told her that she would only *make herself a fool* as Robert Pywall had done—thus further distancing herself from the hunt for treasure .

After Susan became too sick to continue digging, they both went into Susan's house and Anne told her about Robert Pywall having also been *troubled with treasure*.

When Pywall had tried his hand at digging, George said he provided him a with short spit, at his request, with which to sound the ground, and they (he and Pywall—Anne is not mentioned in George's account) heard a *sound as if the spit had hit upon some brass pot*. But when he dug again, they found nothing. Pywall then again sounded the ground with the spit and

found the [sound] to be two foot lower. And then he digged the third time, and he found the sound to be very near in his judgment. And then he digged further, but as he digged further so to his judgment...the sound was further off.... Pywall saying *he did labour in vain*, gave over his work and filled up the hole again.

The treasure kept *going away*, just as Anne and Susan had found.

\* \* \*

Why this obsession with buried treasure? First and foremost, people *did* bury money and valuables in the ground. What else was there to do with them? There were no banks, and locked chests could be broken open or carried away. Before the Reformation, people used to leave money for safe keeping in abbeys, monasteries and convents. Since the monks and nuns were not supposed to have personal possessions, it was harder for them either to spend the money or pass it on to others—and of course they were expected to be less venal than ordinary people. But all such sacred institutions had been dissolved. Money could be—and often was—loaned out by rich people to others in small sums, but then there was the problem of getting it back.

Take the predicament of the Vicar of Halifax, who in 1537 owned the huge sum of £800 in coins. Keeping the money from thieves was a particular problem because catholic rebellion had broken out in the northern counties (the Pilgrimage of Grace). Yet he simply hid the coins in the ground, in a brass pot with short feet (metal pots with three feet were common, since all cooking was done over open fires).



His neighbour Thomas Lacey, emboldened perhaps by the general lawlessness, and hearing that the vicar *was wont to hide money in the ground*

Took a piked staff and struck into the ground and at the first stroke hit the pot. Took the money home in his sleeve.

Large sleeves were fashionable at that period, and Lacey was no pauper.

Thomas Lacey used the same method, then, as the Rye treasure-hunters, but unlike them, he actually found the money. There is a further twist to the story, however. Anxiety about spiritual retribution appears to have got the better of him, because he confessed the theft to a priest during Lent, and returned most of the money. He defended his actions by saying it was treasure trove, and did not belong to the vicar.

This curious twist in the tale does not just illustrate the peculiar psyche of Thomas Lacey. Spiritual retribution—not necessarily of a godly kind—was of much wider concern, as was the associated belief that treasure usually had a rightful owner.

\* \* \*

That stony, sunken spot under the appletree in Anne's garden had special qualities. There was not only treasure hidden there, but it was also haunted by spirits, as Anne told Philip Williams when he was gardening for them.

Appletrees were associated with fairies in medieval stories and songs—Tam Lin, in the ballad of the same name, was carried away by fairies when sleeping under an apple tree, as was Sir Lancelot, and Queen Meroudys in the medieval poem of *King Orfeo*. Apples were perhaps the pre-eminent English symbol of fruitfulness—so the English translators of the Bible chose to translate the non-specific *fruit of the tree of good and evil* as an apple.

Both humans and spirits were interested in the apples on the Taylors' tree. Susan's neighbour on the other side from the Taylors, Phyllis Swan (the wife of a sailor), asked her to get some of them for her. She was pregnant, and had a craving for green apples. Then again a

spirit in the likeness of a woman great with child did appear unto [Susan] in her house in the day time, and did wish that she had some apples, whereupon [she] went to Mistress Taylor and told her of it ...

There was something else under the ground next to the appletree. Susan said in a later examination that one of the spirits told her that those

things that [Susan] was troubled withall was true... it was money that was hidden amongst the thyme in Mistress Taylor's garden. And that Mistress Taylor did know thereof, and did tell [her] that the ground where the thyme grew is hollow, and that the same had been vawted.

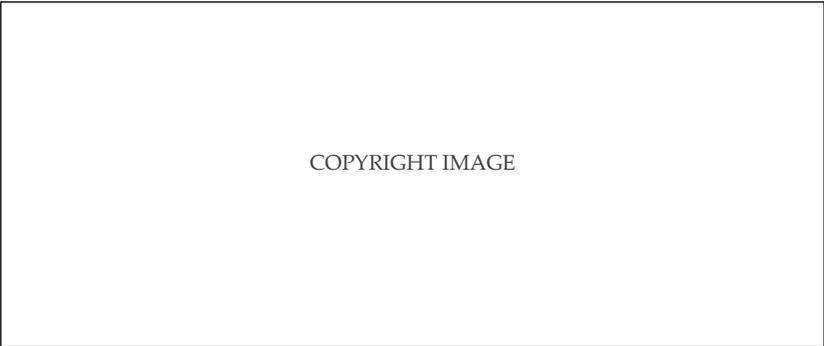
Vaulted stone cellars were not unusual under the houses of Rye—often used by merchants to store their Gascon wine—and they were often much older than the buildings above. The houses were built with frameworks of wood, so they burned down easily, leaving the cellars behind. One cellar was mentioned earlier in the century which only had a garden above, so the foundations of an old medieval building may have lain under the Taylors' garden.

There had, indeed, been a medieval mansion beyond the end of their garden which must have dominated the town at one time. It was owned around 1500 by the King's Bailiff and courtier John Shurley, whose main seat was at Isted in Sussex—he probably only descended on Rye with his retinue for occasional visits. He was also briefly one of the town's jurats—in those days the advantages of having an important man as jurat outweighed the lack of independence which it entailed for the corporation. This mansion would have had extensive wine cellars, and was later broken up into smaller units, so it is possible that since that time some of its land with an abandoned cellar beneath had been bought by former owners of the Taylors' garden.

Anne and Susan may, of course, have had quite other ideas as to what was buried under the thyme. Spirits were often thought to haunt ruins—had there been a burial in unconsecrated ground? When one of the spirits later brought back a sheet that Susan had given him, there was clay on it, as if it had been taken underground. Anne could have planted the thyme there to increase its potency in medicines, because herbs grown in burial

grounds were thought to be more powerful. Thyme was also said to be associated with fairies.

The *summerhouse* next to the appletree, in which Anne had tried digging for treasure (according to Susan), is a curious ingredient in this scene. Summerhouses (*summerhalls*, *arbours*) were very popular in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, whether in private gardens, or as a centrepiece for village games, where the summer lords reigned, and cakes and ale were served. This one must have been more substantial than the usual flimsy structures made from boughs and creepers, because it appears to have been mentioned in the will of Anne's grandfather back in 1564 (an unusual item in a Rye will). It is there called a *herber*, which was a common medieval word for a sheltered pleasure garden, planted with flowers and possibly herbs, and usually surrounded by high fences or walls. It could also be spelt *arbour*/*harbour*—meaning a shelter, whether for people or ships. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century the meaning of the word narrowed—now referring to a sheltered part of the garden, rather than the whole of it. This one might therefore have been the remains of the old building whose vaulted cellar had been left below ground, together with, perhaps, the nearby herb beds and apple tree. Remnants of an old house frame would have provided an ideal support for creepers.



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A Herber.

Buried treasure seems to have spawned spiritual guardians as readily as bad meat bred maggots. The connection is spelt out by a cunning woman who told a wealthy widow that her late husband had buried money around their house, *for which cause there are sprites now that haunt your house*. Sussex folklorists record many tales of treasure guarded by spirits which took various forms, such as a black hen, snakes, or simply the devil. The origins of most of these stories are lost in the mists of time, but we could take as an example one which was reported in a 19<sup>th</sup> century newspaper. A couple of Sussex hills were reputed to have Aaron's golden calf buried there, and a writer in the West Sussex Gazette reported that *my Dad* said that his grandfather had got up early one Easter Sunday to dig for it in one of these hills (did he think that digging on such a holy day would provide some spiritual protection?). He did catch sight of a lump of gold, but was *almost deafed by a clap o' thunder, an' when he looked again, the gold was gone*. Another 19<sup>th</sup> century countryman said that several people had attempted to find the treasure, but *he* (presumably the guardian spirit) always moves it away. Other people thought that the calf was the guardian spirit of a Viking hoard, and could be heard lowing on certain nights.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, shape-changing spirits of dubious morality were not the only kind of spirit who might provide protection for treasure. One reason why people left their savings at abbeys, monasteries and convents before they were dissolved was that these places were sacred—and those who violated them would be cursed. The wayside crosses which dotted the pre-Reformation countryside were also thought to be a good place to hide money—they were not only sacred, but had the advantage that you did not have to rely on the honesty of monks and nuns.

The dissolution of the monasteries perhaps dealt a blow to people's faith in this form of protection, because there was a spate of treasure-hunting at this time—in particular, digging up wayside crosses. Crosses were easier to dig up than ex-monasteries, and less obviously belonged to anyone. The authorities were not sure what to do with such troublemakers. When some glovers and labourers were examined in 1538 about the digging up of a cross at Willington in Sussex, the examining magistrate wrote to Thomas Cromwell (Secretary of State) to ask whether they should be sent up to London. One of the men was quoted as saying in a scoffing manner, as they left an alehouse

*There be many crosses digged up hereabouts, and men say there is much money under Willington Cross, which, if thou wilt be ruled by me, we will have.*

Another said that he had often dreamed there was money under the cross. They attempted it with a shovel and three mattocks, but found no money. Some other Sussex artisans were examined about digging up a cross near Chichester in 1547 in search of treasure; they were pardoned. If Henry VIII could plunder religious buildings without spiritual retribution, why not ordinary people? Such activities generated the phrase *cross-digger*, meaning a man on the make—comparable to *hill-digger*, which referred to those who dug for treasure in ancient burial mounds or hills frequented by fairies.

The authorities reacted with considerable alarm to this treasure-hunting, as is evident from the extraordinary act passed in 1542 which made the conjuring of spirits to find buried treasure a capital offence on the first conviction.

Note that treasure-hunting *without* conjuring was not targeted by any particular order or regulation—they were either assumed to go together, or it was thought that successful prospectors for buried treasure were most likely to have used conjuring to achieve their ends. The best negotiators with guardian spirits were other spirits, and early modern treasure hunting groups often included somebody experienced in conjuring spirits, or who at least had a book on the subject—he was usually a priest or schoolmaster who could read latin.

The Act of 1542 was also the first time that murder by witchcraft entered the statute book—but it was *treasure-hunting* that was the first item in the Act (followed by detection of lost and stolen goods). Making such crimes statutory offences was not in itself peculiar—the secular courts were taking over some types of criminal and civil cases in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century that had formerly only been actionable at church or local courts—but infliction of the death penalty was an extreme response. Concern about it soon relaxed, however, and the Act was repealed only five years later. Six years after this (in 1563) another Act was passed making it again a statutory offence to conjure spirits in order to find buried treasure (amongst other crimes), but the death sentence could only be imposed for a second offence, and cross-digging was not mentioned.

The legal owner of all such *treasure trove* was the Crown (if the original owner was unknown), and the Tudor monarchs were not slow to take advantage of this. A succession of people were licensed by them to search for treasure in different parts of the country. The metal was to be used by the Crown for coining, and the finders were permitted to keep a certain proportion for themselves. Conjuring was acceptable for those

who were thus licensed (since they were unlikely to be successful without it).

What the Rye treasure-hunters were doing was therefore technically illegal—but there were many activities that were illegal that were nevertheless rarely prosecuted. Thief-detection with the help of spirits or rituals was similarly illegal, but this did not stop some cunningfolk being bold enough to inform the authorities who to charge with theft, after they had used their divining skills to reveal the culprit. Anne and Susan were not, it is true, actually *conjuring* spirits—or at least not as revealed by the evidence considered thus far...

\* \* \*

If they had succeeded in finding the treasure, Anne would not, anyway, have defined it as *treasure trove* (if she knew what this meant), since she considered herself *heir* to it (according to Susan). It was, in some unspecified sense, hers by right. This was not a simple question that could be sorted out by the law of inheritance, however, because in a flash of antagonism towards her husband, Anne said *it was god's will that he should not enjoy it*, and the *he* appears to refer to George! She said this (according to Susan) when Robert Pywall was trying to dig for treasure:

... Master Taylor coming to the place where he digged, [Anne] said  
*The further they digged, the further the money was off. But, she said, she was heir to the money, and therefore it was god's will that he should not enjoy it. ...*

This curious juxtaposition of statements seems to imply that the treasure had *gone away* when George arrived, because he had no right to it. It is possible that she meant that *Pywall* should not enjoy it—but if that were the case, why did she then ask him to carry on digging? Pywall did not perhaps really count, because he was just hired labour. Roger also heard Anne say that they could not hear the *sound* after George arrived on the scene *nor knew not what became thereof*. The implication seems to be that Anne thought she had a *moral* right to the money, even if, by law, George acquired all her possessions at marriage.

George appears to have been unaware of the effect of his presence on the treasure (or does not admit to it)—in fact, they get closer to finding it in his account than in any other, because Pywall actually hits something that might be a brass pot.

There is a Somerset tale that illustrates the meaning of a *moral* right to treasure—a folklorist recorded it as recently as the 1920s. As in Rye, the treasure was buried under an appletree. A man who had been deprived of his inheritance rented an orchard that was rightfully his. One Christmas he had wassailed the trees with his last mug of mulled cider, and the oldest apple tree (known as *appletree man*) told him:

*'You take and look under this gurt diddicky root of ours'. And there was a chest full of finest gold.*

*'Tis yours, and non one else', say the Apple-Tree Man. 'Put'n away zafe and bide quiet about'n'. So he done that.*

The coming and going of treasure, therefore, has to do with the moral right of the person digging. The role of the guardian spirit (in the above example, *appletree man*) appears to be tied up with this in a manner that may not be altogether straightforward. Those who are chancing their luck might expect spiritual retribution, unless they can command a more powerful spirit to defend their interests.

\* \* \*

Robert Pywall was gripped by fear when he was digging for the treasure, so Anne told Susan. This is not surprising given that spirits were guarding it, and only those who had a moral right to it were likely to be successful. But she told him:

fear not, for she was with child, and I hope in god nothing will hurt us

Being pregnant was clearly thought to provide some protection.

George too said that because he was frightened, Pywall had wanted him to stand there while he dug. As far as George was concerned, that was the end of the story. But his wife read more into it, for she told Susan that:

Pywall was fearful, and his colour vaded away, and she thought in her conscience that he died of it.

Indeed, Pywall died soon after, in May 1605. Fear was a recognised cause of death at this period—about one such death a year was listed in the London Bills of Mortality (drawn up by local women, not physicians).

Perhaps it was because Susan's house was haunted, along with the garden, that Pywall had had a similar symptom to Susan's when he had lived in it. For him, instead of curing his symptoms and making him rich, digging for treasure had had fatal consequences.

All this talk of fear, and cravings for treasure, did not wash with the prosaic Roger. Identifying, perhaps, with another lowpaid worker, he said that Pywall had been arguing with Anne about how to divide the proceeds, and had downed tools because she would not make a definite offer. Pywall wanted half, and refused to continue until George came.

Anne made a more attractive offer to Susan than she had to Pywall:

[she] willed her that *If the spirits should appear unto her again, in regard they had digged already and could find nothing, that she should ask them the sum of it, and in what place and wherein it was. And whether there were any more in any other place...If she did find the money she would give unto [Susan] one hundred pounds, and that she and her children should never want whilst she lived.*

What reassuring words! Susan does not say whether or not she ever put Anne's question to the spirits.

Susan had had a better experience than Robert Pywall, since in spite of having to stop digging early in the day because she felt ill, she *did sleep in quiet* that night, and *was not any ways troubled*. And again the next night she *did sleep in quiet and heard nothing*. It seems the spirits were as good as their word—she had no symptoms of any sort, and the spirits themselves no longer haunted her. Indeed, shortly *after that time she was not troubled in a long space, but she grew to be well*. Her spirits did not in fact depart, but they stopped being threatening.

\* \* \*

The spot in Anne's garden under the appletree was not the only place where treasure might be found. One of the questions which Anne had wanted Susan to ask the spirits (so Susan said) was whether or not there was *any more [money] buried in any other place*. Susan does not say if she passed on the query, but an answer came nonetheless in a typically gnomic pronouncement. A spirit man first asked her:

*What [Anne] had in the Summer house. And [Susan] answered, She could not tell.*

A curious question—were not the *spirits* the ones most likely to know what was in the summerhouse?

And then he said unto her again, that  
*Those things that [Susan] was troubled withall was true. And that the field at Weeks G[reen] was ploughed and the crock was broken, and some part thereof was found and the rest was left behind. And so [the spirits] departed.*

Weeks Green was a hamlet situated about a mile north of Rye, where the London road entered the Weald (there is a Houghton Green there now—perhaps it was just renamed after a different inhabitant).

And then in the morning Mistress Taylor came unto her again, and asked 'What news?' And [Susan] did tell her as before is said. And then she said 'Is it even so? Well I have a groat of the same money', which she said she gave sixpence for.

Must be a joke—since a groat was only worth fourpence! So a farmer had found some treasure buried in a pot in the field at Weeks Green when he was ploughing, but there was still some left that had not been dug up. Nothing further came of this disclosure, however, until later in the year.

\* \* \*

When spring was turning into summer, Susan did pursue the matter—again prompted by the spirits:

And after Whitsontide last, the two men and women appeared unto her again. And the two women came into her chamber, and the two men went up into another chamber .... And one of the women said unto her, 'How now, now thou art well!' and she answered 'Yea, I thank god'. And then she said, 'Thou must go with me' and I answered 'In the name of god, whether must I go with you?' And [her] girl coming up [to?] the chamber, the woman vanished away. And then she went unto Mistress Taylor and told her of it. And Mistress Taylor said 'Well, you shall hear more soon', and willed her that *If they should require her to go any whither with them, that she should have a strong faith in god, and so go with them.* And the next night following, two of them came unto her, and one of them asked her *Whether she would go with them,* and she said

*No, she would not go with them that night, but the next day she would go with them, by gods help.*

And the next morning she went to Mistress Taylor and told her what had passed that night. And Mistress Taylor then asked her

*Why she did not go with them?* And she answered that

*She was too much afraid to go by night, unless she had some to go with her.* And then [Anne] said

*I promise thee, I should be afeared to go, too.*

And the next day between twelve and one of the clock, [she] being a lone in her house, did hear a great stamp in the loft over the hall. And then she went up, and the tall man asked her

*Whether she would go with him?* and she answered

*'Aye, by the grace of god, if you...[will] tell me whither'.* And then he said

*She should go to Weeks [Green], and asked whether she would go with him or a lone?*

And she answered

*She had rather go alone, if she knew the way.* And then she went to Mistress Taylor and told her of it, and Mistress Taylor told her

*'The way is easy to be found',* and so she directed her the way, and told her *by what token she should know the house.*

Even though Anne appears to be so interested in the spirits, there does not seem to be any question of *her* going to Weeks Green—yet she knows the way, and Susan does not.

*The house.* This was a farmhouse that used to belong to Anne's father Robert—another connection with the Bennett family. Robert Bennett had been burdened by debt when he died—a victim of the plague epidemic of 1596—and the *house, barn and orchard beneath Weeks Green* and other lands in the same parish had had to be sold to pay the debts off. He had left these properties directly to Anne (his only surviving child), not first to her mother for her life, as with his properties in Rye. He had hoped that the profits from the farm would cover his debts.

Widow Bennett had tried to keep the farm in the family—she and her daughter had been betrothed to marry one of their creditors and his son—Thomas and John Lashenden. The Lashendens were tanners, to whom Robert Bennett (butcher) had presumably sold his hides—and perhaps also received loans from the richer man. I do not know when these dual betrothals had been broken off—perhaps when Anne landed her gentleman suitor. But in spite of this extraordinary achievement, perhaps Anne still felt that the disasters that befell them in the 1590s were unjust. That crock full of money in the field at Weeks Green was rightfully *hers*.

\* \* \*

The scene that unfolded when Susan got to Weeks Green was, however, all her own.

And thereupon [she] went to Weeks Green by the house. And there she did see the tall man stand in the street by the orchard, and he willed her to *Follow him*, thorough a rye field into the greenfield next to it, which she did. And in the middle of the field there was a valley of th'one side, and a bank of th'other. And there he did tell her *In that valley there was a pot, and in that pot there was gold, and upon the top of the pot a chain. And beside the pit under a little stub, there was a crock, metal with three legs, and [in] which there was money.*

This sounds like a mythical landscape—in the middle of the field there was a valley of th'one side, and a bank of th'other—but it is actually a realistic description of the lie of the land around there, where several fields rise up in the middle, and then slope down on the other side, like a very large bank.

Susan has made her (or the spirit's) purpose very clear, but what actually happens is something else (rather like a dream):

And then he bade her *Set down upon a bank*, and she did set down. And then she saw a man all in black on the on[e] side of the hedge, and a woman in green on the same side, one going to meet another (as she thought). And as she set, she thought the ground did move under her, and then she cried *'Lord have mercy upon me, what shalbe come of me!'* And then the tall man came to her again, and bade her *Be not afraid, for she should have no harm.* And then she looked about her again, and did see the two persons which she did see by the hedge side, and she asked the tall man what they were. And he said *the woman in green is the [Queen] of the Fayries, and that if [Susan] would kneel to her, she would give her a living.* But she did not kneel unto her. And then she looked about, and they were gone. And the tall man came to her again, and willed her to *'Rise, and go home'*, but she could not rise. And then he willed her *In the name of god, to rise*, and then she rose and went home, and the men [sic] vanished away.

Was Susan too proud, or too scared, to ask the Queen of the Fairies to be her patron?

And so [she] went home sick to bed, and sent for Mistress Taylor, and told her all the discourse. And she asked her

*The Story*

*Whether she did see nothing else, and she said  
No. Then Mistress Taylor said  
She had been troubled with that before, and wished she had a hundred pounds to buy  
her farm again.*

So Anne hoped that the treasure could be used to buy the farm back—she clearly thought it was her due. She got too demanding, however, and earned a reproof from the spirits (through Susan). She had asked Susan to

*Demand of them when she could have some money of them, for if she had a thousand  
pounds she could tell where to have a purchase for the same. And [Susan]  
accordingly, the next time her familiars appeared unto her, did ask them  
When the said Mistress Taylor should have money of them. And the tall man, who  
named himself to be Richard, said that  
If she be so hasty, she shall tarry until she had a child of her body, should live to be six  
years old.*

They might indeed consider her greedy to demand a *thousand pounds!* (the largest houses in Rye cost £80-90). Her punishment was a long wait—over 4 years, since her son George was only 19 months old. She also had a 5-year-old step-daughter, Elizabeth (her husband’s daughter by a previous marriage), so perhaps this is why the spirit specified a *child of her body*.

After this incident, Susan made no more attempts to find treasure—or at least none that she told the magistrates about.



[Rye 13/7]

Above is Susan’s mark, at the bottom of her examination. She has carefully written an S—not the careless cross that people often made—pressing so hard on the paper that she has spattered ink drops (her S is in a common style, although different from that of the town clerk, who has written her name next to it). Each witness and examinee had to sign or make their mark at the bottom of their deposition or examination.

The copy of Susan’s mark shown above is actually from her *second* examination, since the original of the first has not survived—what we have is a copy, written in the very neat handwriting of one of the jurats, with none of the usual crossings-out. Perhaps the original document was

sent to the town's counsel, Serjeant Shurley, when the magistrates later wrote to him to check the legality of the trial.

\* \* \*

Susan's relations with the spirits had improved. Spirit Richard was now acting as her guide, and giving her useful advice. There were no more episodes of lameness.

About the time that spirit Richard acquired a name, he was also given, on occasion, a new identity—as her *familiar* (he could hardly be familiar if he were nameless). Is this an ominous development? Was it Susan who had used that word, or had the town clerk substituted it for a different word? Most people have heard about familiars—they are those little imps in the shape of toads, cats or other small creatures, with names like Piggin and Pyewacket, who carry out foul deeds for witches in return for suckling hidden teats on their bodies. Or are they? If you rely on the tabloid press of the period—the pamphlet accounts of witchcraft trials—this is the type of story that you get. But there are few such animal familiars in the surviving legal evidence (except those relating to the witch-hunt which occurred during the Civil War). Instead, the witches themselves sometimes appear to their victims in the shape of an animal (or indeed in their own shape)—a rather more frightening witch-image, perhaps, than the old woman who is somewhat at the mercy of her little imps. These records are admittedly not very representative, because the only examinations and evidence for the Assize courts that *do* survive are for the northern counties of England.

This at least suggests that we do not have to struggle to fit spirit Richard into the mould of an animal familiar when he is referred to as a *familiar*. The word means *one of the family* (in the loose sense used at that period), and he certainly seems to have acquired a special relationship with Susan. He was her special guide, and only she could see him—as indeed all the spirits (Robert Pywall had no such privilege).

That spell of fever in the early months of the year had melted the boundaries between the ordinary, material world and more nebulous realities, and enabled the spirits to make their presence felt. After that, Susan was sensitised to their existence. She could see them not only in her own house, but also in the street, in a crowd of people, on the gungarden, going into the church. And no-one else could—though there is a question mark over Anne Taylor. Susan often implies that Anne will not have dealings with them because she is *frightened*, but it seems to me that the

overall implication of Susan's account—and everyone else's—is that Anne is not able to see them. So even though Anne feels that the treasure is *hers*, it is in *her* garden, and in *her* field at Weeks Green, and she knew about the spirits and the treasure before Susan arrived, she cannot deal with the spirits because they have chosen Susan to be their medium (if you can use the same word as in spirit possession). Yet Anne appears to know much more about how to deal with them than Susan—or that is what the latter implies, emphasising her own ignorance and innocence.

Susan's experience might be compared with that of practitioners termed *shamans* by anthropologists (borrowing the Siberian word), who, on recovery from a spirit-induced illness, manage to tame that spirit and then employ it (or them) to help cure others suffering from similar illnesses. Would she rise to this vocation? And might those cunningfolk who obtained their knowledge from the fairies also have been fairy-taken or fairy-gripped at one time?

Even if other people in Rye could not *see* the spirits, they could *hear* them, so they did not have to rely entirely on Susan's words. There were those noises in the upper chambers of their house that Roger thought were made by weasels—*great stamping, knocking, lumbering* (must have been heavy-footed weasels—though some people thought that weasels *were* fairies). Anne Taylor and Susan's sister Elizabeth also heard the noises. We have a term for such spirits today—*poltergeists*—but what did the people who heard them think they were? What did Susan think these spirits were, that she nearly always referred to as just that—*spirits*?

\* \* \*

The word that was occasionally used of Susan's spirits was *fairy*—both by Susan and others. George Taylor added an extra *s* to the word—*faïreses*—in a letter to the magistrates. Adding an extra *s* to plurals was a Sussex custom (like *waspses* and *ghostses*), and it has been said that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fairies were implicated with the Biblical *pharisees*! The town clerk, however, was not a local man, and did not use this spelling when he recorded the examinations and evidence.

Banish any thought of diminutive beings with gossamer wings. Fairies were generally about human-size, although they could vary. And the commonly used euphemisms *fair folk* and *good neighbours* were not descriptions, but terms of *flattery*. These terms were intended to deflect any malice that these beings might harbour against us, and encourage

them instead to act in ways appropriate to the titles that we use—to be our helpers.

There were various tokens which would suggest that these spirits were fairies—apart from the give-away of meeting the Queen of the Fairies. The spirits were dressed in green and white, which were often considered to be fairy colours (and it was *green apples* that were desired—unripe apples, because it was still summer, the time *when apples were green*); they inflicted lameness by gripping the victim—perhaps a more severe form of the *pinching* that was often said to be typical behaviour; they haunt a spot under an appletree, where thyme grows—both associated with fairies; and finally, they threatened to *carry her away*, which is a typical fairy action, even if it was not to a fairy hill (and she was not the typical victim, a baby or nursing mother).

But we should not be too dogmatic about what type of spirit these were. After all, Scottish fairies were often people who had died—so ghosts and fairies were not clearly distinguished there. The well-known Scottish cunning woman Bessie Dunlop had a familiar named Thom Reid, who had died at the battle of Pinkie, fighting the English (1547). She told the widow of the Laird of Auchinskeyth, who had died a few years before Bessie was interrogated (1576), that her late husband was with the fairies.

These Scottish catholics presumably *also* thought that the dead might be in purgatory, waiting for the prayers of the living to wing them heavenwards (or perhaps purgatory was the state of remaining *here* in this world). But reality is muddy—or at least not as clearcut as the various churches would have liked it to be. *Theologians like their spirits out of this world, and either good or evil* according to one historian, whereas for ordinary people spirits were more often ambivalent and local—the souls of people who had been known when they were alive.

Spirit Richard has some similarities with Scottish familiar spirits. Bessie describes her familiar's clothes in as much detail as Susan does; like her, she sees him sometimes amongst all the people in the marketplace, as well as when there is no-one there; she meets the *Queen of Elfame, his mistress*, who had told Thom to *wait upon [Bessie] and do her good*. Bessie claims to get all her skills in healing from Thom—she herself knows nothing, like Susan. And like Susan, she had been in a vulnerable state when her familiar first appeared to her—newly risen from childbed.

Thom's relations with God are contradictory—he reprehends Bessie for displeasing god on the one hand, and then demands that *she deny her christendom* and go with him. One may suspect the influence of the interrogators here, since they found her guilty, amongst other things, of

invoking and being familiar with *sprites of the devil* (the terse marginal note *convict, and brynt* [burnt] is the only record of her fate). The idea of the *pact with the devil* would soon be a spur to the witch-hunt in Scotland, as also in the other worst-affected areas of Europe (more on this later).

It may seem perverse not to be discussing other *English* fairies—but there is just nothing comparable in English court records. Why this should be so we will return to in the next chapter. Court records are *the* major source for popular beliefs in an era before newspapers, and before the growth of antiquarian interest in folklore (starting the middle and end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, respectively). There are, it is true, some legal cases that I have not mentioned—of fraud, brought against cunningfolk who had claimed to be able to make their clients rich by applying to the Queen of the Fairies. On these cases, I refer you to Ben Jonson, who has the phenomenon drawn to a *T* in his play *The Alchemist*.

\* \* \*

Thinking of those Scottish fairies—who were often, like Thom, dead heroes—suggests an origin for spirit Richard's name, and his curious dress (a *fairy* in a *surplice*?!). Susan no doubt wanted to present him as nearer to God than the Devil, but the idea of the surplice may have had a deeper resonance. The name *Richard* would have been associated by local people—at least those who hankered after the old religion—with holiness, in the person of Saint Richard of Chichester, who had been a popular local saint in Sussex and Kent before the Reformation. In Rye, money had been collected quarterly for Saint Richard's shrine, which was located in Chichester cathedral, together with relics of the saint. His hat would have been an appropriate relic for ague-stricken Rye, since a man was miraculously cured of the ague by having the saint's hat put on his head at the *exact* moment the next fit was due, and he never suffered from it again.

We can not know what Susan knew about this humble but determined man, but one thing that she might have been familiar with—perhaps in a picture or image that had survived the iconoclasm of the Reformation—was the token by which he could be identified, the chalice at his feet. This represented the miraculous occasion when he dropped the chalice while administering holy communion, and not a *drop* of the consecrated wine was spilt. To someone interested in searching for buried treasure, however—not just a pot of money but also silver cups and spoons (according to George Taylor)—this chalice might have suggested

something quite else. Susan may not have consciously identified her spirit with the saint, rather ideas about the saint, or his image, might have been in the back of her mind, and informed her depiction of the spirit.

Then there is the saint's *whiteness*—when he died, his body apparently shone brilliantly white. Susan mentions twice that she saw her familiar spirit in white—once when she first saw him, and then again later when she saw the spirit going into the Church for the funeral of Anne's son. In medieval thought, whiteness had been a sign that a spirit had reached heaven. If a ghost had asked for masses to be said to help him (rarely her) get to heaven, and then subsequently appeared in shining white, it would indicate that the efforts of the living had been effective.

The whiteness was particularly important at the funeral, because he appeared to Anne—as reported by Susan—to be in *black*, in a flat cap (sitting in the gallery of the church, during the sermon). The flat cap had been fashionable in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but by this date was only worn by tradesmen, so Susan is depicting him as a merchant, in a typical merchant's black gown. Or does the blackness indicate that Anne is seeing the devil (a man in early 16th century Switzerland recognised a figure in a church to be a demon because it changed from white to black)? This occasion was, incidentally, the only time that Anne saw him, as reported by Susan.

A *saint* may seem a long way from a *fairy*, but medieval saints could on occasion be as capricious as non-saintly spirits, inflicting the illnesses that they professed to cure.

\* \* \*

I have suggested that Bessie's account may have been influenced by the interrogators—but what about Susan's? Did her interrogators ask her questions, prompt her for answers? And what did they make of her story—did it reek of irreligion, as Bessie's story did to her Presbyterian interrogators (who were probably members of the local Kirk)? Who *were* Susan's interrogators...