



THE PEOPLE BENEATH ENGLAND

*Neanderthals, Wild Men, UFOs and
the Secret of Hyperborea*

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Hyperborea

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A Note Before We Begin

This book began with a noise in the woods.

It led me through the forests and villages of England, into pre-historic archaeology, medieval folklore, childhood memories, UFOs, and the possibility that some of our oldest neighbours never quite went away.

Some of what follows happened to me. Some comes from history, folklore and the accounts of others. And some is speculation, occasionally taken a considerable distance.

I have no particular wish to persuade you of anything.

I simply invite you along for the journey.

— Doktor Snake

CHAPTER ONE: A RUM OLD DO

It began, as these things often do, with a sandwich and a cup of coffee.

I was parked on Wyrley's Drove, a quiet country lane near Croxton in Norfolk, beside the Ministry of Defence's Stanford Training Area. It was winter 2021, and the darkness had settled over the Breckland countryside.

I'd moved to the area earlier that year, having spent some years in Norwich. I was getting to know the back roads, the forests, the forgotten churches and the places where you could park without anybody bothering you.

Wyrley's Drove had become one of my regular stopping places.

There was a farm gate with a Ministry of Defence warning sign. Danger. Keep Out. Beyond it lay a large field, sometimes occupied by sheep. To the south were woods, including the curious natural feature known as the Devil's Punchbowl. To the east stretched Croxton Heath, an extensive tract of woodland reaching towards the main road.

It was an agreeable place.

Not picturesque in the conventional sense. No spectacular views, no romantic ruins, no convenient tourist information boards explaining what one ought to think about the surroundings.

Just fields, trees, a narrow road and a military warning sign.

Precisely my sort of place.

I'd often stop there after visiting Sainsbury's. Buy something to eat, make myself comfortable in the car, drink coffee and look out across the landscape.

In winter, I sometimes went there after dark.

People occasionally find this peculiar. Why would anybody deliberately drive into the countryside at night, park beside a military training area and sit there drinking coffee?

But I found it peaceful.

There was something liberating about leaving the human world behind for an hour or two. The shops, the traffic, the endless conversations, the digital communications, the ceaseless business of being a modern human being.

Out there, none of it mattered.

The darkness had its own existence.

And I rather liked entering it.

On this particular evening I'd finished my sandwich and decided to get out of the car.

Nothing unusual about that. I often stretched my legs after sitting for a while.

I walked over to the farm gate and leaned against it, looking out into the darkness.

The field lay ahead of me. Behind and to the south were the woods.

There wasn't much to see.

But darkness is interesting precisely because it removes the visual information we're accustomed to receiving. The mind becomes more attentive to other things. Small sounds. Movements of air. The sense of distance.

During daylight, you look at a woodland and see trees.

At night, you confront an enormous black shape containing things you cannot see.

It's the same woodland.

But it isn't the same experience.

I stood there for a while, enjoying the silence.

Then I heard something.

A cry.

It seemed to come from the woods to the south, perhaps somewhere around the Devil's Punchbowl, although it was difficult to judge the distance.

I listened.

Another cry followed.

Then more.

My immediate assumption was that I was hearing animals.

That was reasonable enough. I'd grown up in Stewkley, a village in Buckinghamshire, and was familiar with the sounds of livestock and wildlife.

Owls, foxes, hedgehogs, various creatures going about their nocturnal business.

But these calls were different.

They were fairly high in tone, though not what I'd describe as high-pitched. They had substance to them. A certain fullness.

Cries, rather than squeaks or whistles.

I couldn't identify them.

And I had the impression that more than one creature was making them.

That was an impression, mind you. Not a fact.

Sounds can be deceptive at night. A single animal can produce an astonishing range of vocalisations, and distance can alter what reaches the ear.

Nevertheless, I stood listening.

The calls continued.

There was nothing particularly frightening about them. They didn't sound threatening. Nor did I have the impression that anything was approaching me.

It was simply something I hadn't heard before.

And that interested me.

I remained by the gate for perhaps five minutes.

Then the sounds ceased, or at least I could no longer hear them.

I waited a little longer.

Nothing.

Eventually I returned to the car.

"Well, that was odd," I thought.

And drove home.

Now, at this point in a conventional supernatural story, something dramatic ought to happen.

Perhaps a huge hairy figure emerges from the woods.

Perhaps something strikes the roof of the car.

Perhaps a mysterious light appears above the trees, followed by the discovery that three hours have inexplicably vanished.

None of that happened.

I drove home to Beck Row, near Mildenhall.

I made a cup of tea.

I watched some videos on YouTube.

And went to bed.

This is one of the difficulties with anomalous experiences. They rarely arrange themselves into satisfactory narratives.

An unsettling occurrence may be followed by something as mundane as brushing your teeth.

The universe, whatever else it may be, doesn't appear particularly concerned with dramatic structure.

I woke at approximately half past two in the morning.

Wide awake.

I don't recall having been disturbed by a dream or anything else. I was simply awake.

And then I heard the cries again.

The same strange calls I'd heard earlier near Croxton.

Or at least sounds that appeared identical to me.

I lay there listening.

This was considerably more peculiar than the first incident.

Wyrley's Drove was a good fifteen miles away. I was now in Beck Row, close to RAF Mildenhall, in a residential area with houses, roads and the ordinary infrastructure of village life.

There were fields nearby, certainly.

And wildlife.

But the coincidence was striking.

I'd heard an unfamiliar series of cries in the darkness beside the Stanford Training Area.

Now, several hours later, I was hearing apparently the same sounds outside my home.

They continued for around twenty minutes.

I couldn't see what was producing them.

Nor could I determine precisely where they were coming from.

I listened, considered the matter, and eventually went back to sleep.

Again, nothing dramatic.

No figures at the window.

No mysterious visitors.

No message from another dimension.

Just the sounds.

And then silence.

The next day I considered what had happened.

There were several possibilities.

Perhaps the calls had been made by an animal common to both areas, but one whose vocalisations I hadn't previously encountered.

Perhaps two entirely different animals had produced superficially similar sounds.

Perhaps the second experience had been influenced by my memory of the first. Once the mind has encountered something unfamiliar, it may become particularly sensitive to anything resembling it.

All reasonable possibilities.

But none provided an identification.

And I wasn't particularly inclined to invent one.

This is something I've learned over many years of investigating unusual experiences.

Not knowing what happened is not proof of anything beyond the limits of your explanation.

The distinction is important.

An unidentified sound is an unidentified sound.

It doesn't become a supernatural manifestation merely because you cannot identify it.

Equally, failing to identify something doesn't oblige you to dismiss the experience or pretend it never occurred.

You can simply leave the matter open.

I did.

Although I allowed myself a little imaginative speculation.

What if the sounds had come from some unknown creature inhabiting the woods around Croxton?

And what if, in some peculiar manner, the creatures had followed me home?

That would be quite a proposition, of course.

There was no evidence that anything had physically travelled between the two locations.

Nevertheless, it reminded me of a curious idea sometimes discussed in connection with UFO encounters and other anomalous phenomena.

The so-called hitchhiker effect.

The suggestion is that unusual experiences occasionally appear to follow witnesses from one location to another, as though something associated with the original event has attached itself to them.

Reports of this kind have circulated around investigations at Skinwalker Ranch in Utah, among other places.

The difficulty is determining what, if anything, connects the events.

Are we looking at a genuinely external phenomenon?

An alteration in the witness's attention?

Coincidence?

Memory?

Or some interaction between these possibilities?

I didn't know.

And I certainly wasn't going to conclude that an unidentified animal had travelled fifteen miles to serenade me outside my bedroom.

Although the thought was entertaining.

Perhaps the creatures were offended that I'd left without introducing myself.

There was another reason the Croxton incident interested me.

The surrounding district already possessed something of a reputation for unusual creatures.

Reports had circulated of large, hairy, humanlike figures being encountered in the forests around Thetford.

The local press had covered some of these stories, including alleged sightings of a British equivalent of Bigfoot.

I preferred another name.

Woodwose.

It's an old English word for the wild man of the woods.

Woodwoses appear in medieval art and literature, sometimes as hairy human figures carrying clubs, sometimes as embodiments of wilderness and everything lying beyond the boundaries of civilised society.

They also appear in the carvings of Suffolk churches.

That always amused me.

You could enter a medieval church, supposedly a place dedicated to spiritual order and the triumph of civilisation over chaos, and discover a wild man staring back at you from the woodwork.

The creature had somehow found its way inside.

Not as an intruder.

As part of the decoration.

Medieval England was evidently quite comfortable with the idea that strange beings inhabited the margins of the human world.

Or at least comfortable enough to carve them into church furniture.

Whether anybody genuinely encountered such creatures is another matter.

Folklore isn't a police report.

But neither is it necessarily meaningless.

A story may preserve a distorted recollection, express a psychological concern, embody a social boundary, or simply provide entertainment.

And sometimes a story survives because nobody has quite managed to explain why it began.

The woodwose interested me for another reason.

It occupied an uncertain position between human and animal.

Not quite one.

Not quite the other.

And that uncertainty would eventually lead me towards a much older population of human beings.

One that really had inhabited the forests and plains of East Anglia.

I had been interested in Neanderthals since childhood.

Like many people of my generation, I initially encountered them through books that depicted them as brutish cavemen.

Heavy brows. Shaggy hair. Primitive weapons. A rather unfortunate tendency to look permanently bewildered.

They were generally presented as unsuccessful versions of ourselves.

An evolutionary experiment that hadn't worked out.

Modern humans, by contrast, were the triumphant finished product.

Homo sapiens.

The wise man.

A rather flattering name for a species that spends so much of its time killing its own members, destroying its environment and arguing about money.

But archaeology has changed our understanding of Neanderthals considerably.

They were skilled hunters.

They made sophisticated stone tools.

They worked wood.

They adapted to demanding environments.

And, perhaps most importantly, they were sufficiently closely related to our ancestors that interbreeding occurred.

Many living humans carry Neanderthal-derived DNA.

The supposed division between ourselves and those vanished people was never quite as absolute as the old textbooks suggested.

In a sense, they haven't entirely disappeared.

Some of their genetic inheritance remains within us.

That fact intrigued me.

Especially when I considered the landscape around Croxton.

A few miles away, near Lynford, archaeologists had uncovered evidence of Neanderthal activity dating back tens of thousands of years.

Stone tools.

Mammoth remains.

Evidence of human relatives living and hunting in the very district through which I now drove in my car.

They had known these places long before there were villages, churches, roads or military training areas.

The forests were different then, of course.

The climate was different.

The animals were different.

But the geographical connection remained.

And I found myself wondering what it would have been like to encounter one of those ancient people.

Not a museum reconstruction.

Not a drawing in a book.

A living individual.

Someone looking back at you.

Someone whose mind had developed along a different evolutionary path, but who might nevertheless recognise you as another kind of human.

Would the encounter have been frightening?

Would it have been amusing?

Would you have been able to communicate?

Or would both parties simply have stood there, bewildered?

Perhaps that was the origin of some of the old wild-man stories.

Not necessarily a literal memory of Neanderthals surviving into medieval times. There was no evidence for that.

But perhaps something about the human imagination continued to return to the possibility of another humanity.

A people resembling ourselves, yet fundamentally different.

Living somewhere beyond the boundaries of our familiar world.

In the forests.

In the mountains.

Under the earth.

Of course, the conventional scientific account is that Neanderthals disappeared as a distinct population roughly forty thousand years ago, although their genetic legacy survived through interbreeding.

There is no credible archaeological evidence of Neanderthal communities surviving into historical times.

I understood that perfectly well.

But I'd spent much of my life reading speculative fiction, folklore and accounts of anomalous experiences.

By the age of twelve I'd encountered Philip K. Dick, whose novels introduced the possibility that reality might not be quite what it appeared.

I'd also read Jacques Vallée, who recognised remarkable similarities between modern UFO encounters and older stories of fairies, strange beings and visitors from other worlds.

The curious thing about these traditions was their persistent absurdity.

The beings frequently behaved in ways that made little sense.

They appeared unexpectedly.

They made peculiar statements.

They sometimes seemed to play tricks.

And then they disappeared.

One could dismiss the entire collection as fantasy, misidentification and folklore.

There were certainly good reasons for questioning individual

accounts.

But as a body of stories, the material remained fascinating.

It was almost as though humanity had spent thousands of years encountering—or imagining—something that refused to fit into any stable category.

The explanations changed.

The underlying strangeness remained.

And now I had my own modest contribution.

Some unidentified cries in the darkness near Croxton.

Followed by apparently identical cries outside my home.

Hardly sufficient grounds for rewriting human prehistory.

But enough to make me wonder.

I returned to Wyrley's Drove on numerous occasions.

It remained one of my favourite places.

I continued drinking coffee there, eating sandwiches and enjoying the solitude.

Nothing about the location had fundamentally changed.

The field was still there.

The farm gate.

The Ministry of Defence warning sign.

The woods to the south.

And the enormous invisible history beneath the landscape.

I sometimes thought about the calls.

But I didn't make a project of investigating them.

I didn't set up recording equipment or spend nights attempting to lure unknown animals out of the forest.

There were other things to do.

Life continued.

And the incident gradually joined the collection of unresolved experiences I'd accumulated over the years.

A strange occurrence.

An unanswered question.

A rum old do, as an old East Anglian might say.

Then, the following winter, I was parked at precisely the same place.

Again, it was dark.

Again, I had a coffee.

I was relaxing in the car, looking out across the countryside.

And something appeared in the northern sky.

A formation of dark-red glowing objects.

Silent.

Moving together.

I recognised their appearance immediately.

Because I'd seen something remarkably similar twelve years earlier, above a quiet residential neighbourhood in Norwich.

The objects approached.

For a moment I felt mildly unnerved.

Then, as I watched, they slowly faded.

And disappeared.

I remained in the car.

The darkness returned to its ordinary darkness.

And I found myself facing a rather peculiar question.

What, exactly, was going on around Croxton?

Not that I expected an answer.

But I was beginning to suspect that the landscape had more stories to tell.

And some of them might be very old indeed.

End of Chapter One

CHAPTER TWO: THE MAMMOTH HUNTERS OF LYNFORD

The Neanderthals would probably have enjoyed the cakes.

That's one of the first things that occurs to me whenever I visit Lynford Water, a rather beautiful collection of lakes and woodland in the Norfolk Breckland.

There's a tea hut near the car park. A very good one, actually. Coffee with almond milk, excellent cakes, vegan options and all the other refinements of twenty-first-century civilisation.

Quite a contrast with the mammoth hunters who inhabited this district tens of thousands of years ago.

I sometimes imagine one of those ancient people wandering into the tea hut.

A Neanderthal.

Heavy brow. Powerful build. Dressed in whatever clothing his people had devised to survive the Ice Age.

The proprietor offers him a slice of cake.

He takes a bite.

And suddenly experiences a sensation that would have been almost impossible to obtain in his ordinary environment.

Refined sugar.

An astonishing concentration of readily available energy.

Then somebody gives him a coffee.

Caffeine.

His nervous system encounters another unfamiliar chemical stimulus.

He looks around at the people sitting comfortably with their drinks, chatting about holidays, house prices and the weather.

Perhaps he concludes that these strange descendants of Africa have finally discovered paradise.

Or perhaps he wonders why everybody is sitting around eating cake when they could be doing something useful.

We don't know.

That's the trouble with Neanderthals.

We know quite a lot about their bones and stone tools.

But we know remarkably little about what it was like to be one.

Lynford Water is a pleasant place.

Almost too pleasant.

There's a substantial car park, and the tea hut attracts visitors from across the district. People arrive with dogs, children, walking companions and an apparently inexhaustible appetite for refreshments.

A walk around the lakes, followed by coffee and cake.

Very civilised.

And thoroughly popular.

Which is something of a disadvantage from my point of view.

I've always preferred places that are slightly out of the way. Forgotten lanes, neglected churches, remote woodland tracks, stretches of countryside where you can spend an hour without

encountering another human being.

Not because I dislike people.

I find them endlessly interesting.

But there are times when I want to get away from the collective human mind.

The conversations, the expectations, the shared assumptions about what constitutes a worthwhile activity.

I want to experience the landscape without somebody else's interpretation being imposed upon it.

At Lynford, that generally means walking away from the car park and finding somewhere quiet.

Sometimes there's a gap between the trees overlooking the water.

That's enough.

I'll stand there for a while, looking across the lake.

Not thinking about anything in particular.

Allowing the visual field to occupy my attention.

Water.

Trees.

Reflections.

The occasional movement of a bird.

Gradually, the ordinary stream of thoughts begins to lose its importance.

The mind becomes less concerned with naming and classifying everything.

And something else can happen.

A drift into the visionary.

Not necessarily visions in the dramatic sense. No ancient spir-

its materialising above the lake, no prehistoric hunters emerging from the trees.

Rather, the imagination begins to operate more freely.

Images arise.

Associations.

Fragments of memory.

A feeling that the landscape is no longer simply something you're looking at.

You're participating in it.

This is an interesting distinction.

We normally experience ourselves as observers standing apart from the world.

There's me.

And there's the landscape.

But when attention becomes sufficiently quiet, that division can seem less substantial.

The landscape isn't merely out there.

It's also part of the experience occurring within consciousness.

And consciousness, whatever else it may be, is itself part of the natural world.

I sometimes wonder whether Neanderthals experienced something similar.

Perhaps they did.

Perhaps the distinction between the everyday world and the imaginal was less sharply defined for them.

We cannot know.

But there's no reason to assume that our ancestors and evolutionary relatives lacked rich inner lives.

They had brains.

They had senses.

They dreamed.

At least, given what we know about mammalian sleep, it would be surprising if they didn't.

What they made of their dreams is another question.

One winter afternoon I arrived at Lynford and parked in the usual car park.

The weather wasn't particularly bad. A little drizzle, grey skies, the sort of English winter day that doesn't quite decide whether to become thoroughly miserable.

I got out of the car.

At that moment, a top-of-the-range BMW came hurtling down the lane.

It arrived with the sort of determination one normally associates with somebody approaching the finishing line of a motor race.

The driver parked.

A middle-aged man got out, accompanied by a younger woman.

Both were smartly but casually dressed.

The man had the manner and accent of somebody accustomed to operating comfortably in professional circles.

Publishing, public relations, perhaps one of the more prosperous branches of the communications industry.

I recognised the type immediately.

I'd encountered plenty of people like him during my years writing books and working in national newspaper journalism.

Random House. Orion. Newspaper offices. Literary events.

The publishing world has its own social characteristics.
People learn to recognise one another.
Much as animals do.
I said hello.
They returned the greeting.
And almost immediately we began talking.
It turned out that they'd left London during the Covid period
and relocated to Norfolk.
They had evidently possessed the resources to make a comfortable transition.
The man had worked in publishing, and the young woman was
involved in the same world.
So we had plenty to talk about.
I mentioned my own books and journalism.
The conversation moved easily.
There's something interesting about these encounters.
Human beings are adept at making rapid social assessments.
Accent.
Clothing.
Vocabulary.
Posture.
A few remarks about work or education.
Within seconds, we begin constructing an impression of the
person standing in front of us.
And then we modify our behaviour accordingly.
I've always found this fairly easy.
Having moved through different social environments, I can ad-

just my manner without thinking too much about it.

If the situation calls for a slightly more pronounced London accent, that's easy enough.

"Hello mate, 'ow you doin'?"

If I'm talking to somebody from the publishing world, I might adopt a more restrained manner, with perhaps the faintest suggestion of Estuary English.

Nothing elaborate.

Just enough to establish a comfortable conversational frequency.

It's a kind of social shape-shifting.

And most people do it, whether they recognise it or not.

Standing there talking to the two London exiles, I found myself wondering what a Neanderthal would make of the performance.

Three modern humans, exchanging information through a complex mixture of language, social signals and barely conscious adjustments of behaviour.

Would he recognise what we were doing?

Probably some of it.

Neanderthals must have possessed ways of establishing relationships, negotiating cooperation, assessing threats and recognising social standing.

But how similar were their social conventions to ours?

Did they cultivate different manners for different circumstances?

Could one Neanderthal impress another through displays of status?

Did they have the equivalent of the man who arrives in an expensive motor vehicle at rather excessive speed?

I looked at the BMW.

Perhaps some things never change.

The man was considerably older than his companion.

Twenty years, perhaps.

He was well turned out, confident, evidently accustomed to having money.

I wondered about their relationship.

Perhaps he'd been married before.

Perhaps he had grown-up children.

Perhaps the two had only recently become involved.

There was something about their manner that suggested they hadn't known one another for decades.

The young woman seemed just a little deferential towards him.

But these were impressions.

I didn't know their circumstances, and it wasn't my business.

Still, human beings constantly construct stories about other human beings.

We observe a handful of details and assemble a narrative.

Sometimes we're right.

Sometimes we're spectacularly wrong.

I wondered whether the BMW had been intended to impress her.

Although driving like a boy racer down a Norfolk country lane might not be the most sophisticated method of courtship.

Then again, perhaps it was.

The mating rituals of Homo sapiens are varied.

And often quite ridiculous.

Somehow our conversation turned to Arthur Machen.

That was interesting.

Machen isn't generally the first subject people introduce when standing in a car park beside a Norfolk lake.

But he was a natural point of contact.

The Welsh writer had explored the idea that another world existed alongside our familiar reality.

Not necessarily another physical planet.

Something concealed within the ordinary.

A hidden order.

An ancient presence.

In stories such as *The Great God Pan* and *The White People*, Machen suggested that the everyday world might be only the visible surface of something much stranger.

His fiction was often concerned with the consequences of crossing boundaries that ordinary human beings weren't equipped to understand.

We moved on to Aubrey Beardsley.

Another figure from the strange artistic world of the late nineteenth century.

Beardsley's black-and-white illustrations seemed to belong to a civilisation slightly different from our own.

Elegant.

Decadent.

Grotesque.

Sometimes almost inhuman.

There was something pleasing about discussing Machen and Beardsley beside a Norfolk lake associated with Neanderthal hunters.

The modern publishing world, Victorian decadence and the Middle Palaeolithic had briefly converged in a car park.

Eventually we reached the tea hut.

They asked whether I was going for a walk.

I said I was.

And that I'd be keeping an eye out for the shades of the Neanderthals.

Perhaps, I suggested, there might be a glitch in the Simulation.

A portal might open.

And one of the ancient inhabitants could step through.

The young woman seemed entertained by the idea.

The man appeared less enthusiastic.

Perhaps I'd pushed the conversation just a little beyond the boundaries of respectable literary eccentricity.

Machen and Beardsley were acceptable.

Neanderthals stepping through a malfunction in reality were evidently another matter.

I wished them well and continued on my way.

The archaeological discoveries at Lynford are genuinely remarkable.

During quarrying operations in the early years of the twenty-first century, an extraordinary concentration of mammoth remains and Middle Palaeolithic stone tools was uncovered.

The finds dated to roughly sixty thousand years ago.

The stone tools belonged to the Mousterian tradition, strongly associated with Neanderthals in Europe.

Among the animal remains were numerous bones and teeth of woolly mammoths.

Here was evidence of ancient human relatives operating in

a landscape very different from the Norfolk countryside we know today.

It would be tempting to imagine a group of Neanderthal hunters bringing down a mammoth beside a lake.

But archaeology requires more caution than that.

The presence of tools and mammoth remains together doesn't automatically tell us precisely how the animals died or what the people were doing.

Were they hunting?

Scavenging?

Butchering animals that had died naturally?

Perhaps different activities occurred at different times.

The details remain matters for investigation.

Nevertheless, the association is striking.

People closely related to us were present in this district during the last Ice Age.

They made tools.

They processed animal remains.

They survived in an environment that would have presented formidable challenges.

And they did so without supermarkets, electricity, central heating or motor vehicles.

I sometimes wonder how long the average modern human would last if deposited in that world without equipment.

Not very long, I suspect.

We flatter ourselves that we're exceptionally intelligent.

And in some respects we are.

But much of our apparent competence depends upon an enormous technological and social infrastructure.

Remove it, and our limitations become painfully obvious.

The Neanderthals had no such infrastructure.

Or at least nothing resembling ours.

They possessed knowledge appropriate to their world.

Knowledge acquired through experience, observation and transmission between generations.

And much of that knowledge has vanished.

One of the problems with reconstructing prehistoric life is that the archaeological record is profoundly selective.

Stone survives.

Bone sometimes survives.

Wood usually doesn't.

Neither do fibres, hides, plant materials and countless other substances that may once have formed an important part of daily life.

So we construct our picture of ancient people largely from what happens to remain.

Imagine somebody investigating modern civilisation sixty thousand years from now.

Suppose nearly everything has disappeared.

Our books have rotted.

Our electronic records have become unreadable.

Our vehicles and buildings have corroded or collapsed.

The investigators discover a few durable objects.

They attempt to reconstruct our civilisation from those fragments.

What would they conclude?

Perhaps that we were a species obsessed with ceramic toilets

and concrete foundations.

The finer points of our existence might escape them entirely.

Love.

Music.

Dreams.

Humour.

Philosophy.

The experience of sitting beside a lake and allowing the mind to drift.

Almost none of that leaves a recognisable archaeological signature.

The same problem applies to Neanderthals.

We know they worked stone.

Increasing evidence also demonstrates that Neanderthals and other ancient human populations possessed sophisticated woodworking abilities.

But the wooden objects themselves have usually vanished.

What else has disappeared?

What kinds of containers did they make?

What structures?

What devices?

What objects used in activities that had nothing to do with hunting?

And what about the things that leave no physical trace at all?

Stories.

Songs.

Beliefs.

Methods of directing attention.

Ways of interpreting dreams.

The entire invisible architecture of a culture.

We don't know.

And that ignorance should make us cautious about describing them as primitive.

I continued walking beyond the busier areas of Lynford Water.

The lakes eventually give way to quieter paths.

Following the river, you can reach Mill Carr, where there's a small dam.

Water cascades over it, producing a continuous rushing sound.

I've sat there many times.

It's an excellent place for allowing the mind to drift.

The sound of running water has a curious effect upon attention.

It's complex enough to remain interesting, but repetitive enough that the mind gradually stops trying to analyse it.

You can listen without making much effort.

And after a while, other thoughts begin to fade.

Sometimes images appear.

Sometimes memories.

Sometimes nothing much happens at all.

That's perfectly satisfactory.

On one occasion I recorded the sound of the water so I could listen to it later through headphones.

I found it more effective than many of the professionally produced relaxation recordings available online.

No artificial musical atmosphere.

No reassuring voice instructing me to breathe.

Just water.

The real thing.

I wondered whether the Neanderthals had done something similar.

Not recorded waterfalls, obviously.

But sat beside moving water and allowed themselves to enter a different state of consciousness.

Perhaps a hunter, having spent the day tracking animals, would settle beside a stream.

The immediate demands of survival would recede.

The mind would wander.

Images would emerge.

Memories of animals.

Faces.

Places.

Events.

Perhaps unfamiliar combinations of familiar things.

And perhaps some of those experiences would be interpreted as encounters with beings or places beyond the ordinary world.

It's speculation, of course.

We have no direct access to Neanderthal consciousness.

But it would be peculiar to imagine that their mental lives consisted entirely of practical calculations about food and shelter.

They were members of the human family.

Their brains were substantial.

Their senses were sophisticated.

And they lived in a world that must have presented endless opportunities for wonder.

I suspect they had their own mysteries.

Their own inexplicable experiences.

Their own stories about what might exist beyond the familiar landscape.

Perhaps even their own equivalent of the woodwose.

Some other kind of being, lurking beyond the firelight.

Not far from the lakes stands Lynford Hall.

An imposing country house, now associated with hotel accommodation and the sort of old-fashioned English grandeur that seems almost designed for a television adaptation of a country-house mystery.

I've wandered around its grounds.

It's the sort of place where I could imagine Simon Templar staying.

The Saint.

Roger Moore, naturally.

An expensive car outside.

A mysterious guest.

An attractive woman with a complicated past.

And somewhere in the building, a wealthy gentleman concealing a secret.

The house has an interesting history.

It was built in the nineteenth century for Stephen Lyde, a prosperous merchant whose wealth allowed him to acquire the trappings of landed gentility.

The precise details of his commercial career are less important to my present story than the social transformation represented by the building.

Here was a man who had acquired money and used it to enter a world previously dominated by inherited status.

An outsider becoming an insider.

A newcomer establishing himself within an older social order.

Which brings us back to the Neanderthals.

And the BMW.

And the strange business of human hierarchy.

Modern humans spend a great deal of time establishing distinctions between one another.

Class.

Wealth.

Education.

Accent.

Profession.

Ancestry.

The clothes we wear.

The vehicles we drive.

The places we live.

Entire systems of social meaning are constructed around these things.

Yet viewed across sixty thousand years, the distinctions become rather comical.

The wealthy merchant builds his country house.

The publishing man arrives in his BMW.

The visitors queue for almond-milk coffee and cake.

And beneath it all lies the memory of people who inhabited this landscape long before any of these social arrangements existed.

What would they make of us?

Perhaps they'd find us fascinating.

Perhaps incomprehensible.

Perhaps rather foolish.

Or perhaps they'd recognise more than we'd care to admit.

There was one question that kept returning to me whenever I thought about Neanderthals.

What if our assumptions about their disappearance were incomplete?

Not that I had evidence for a surviving population.

I didn't.

The archaeological and genetic evidence strongly indicates that Neanderthals ceased to exist as a distinct population tens of thousands of years ago.

But fiction permits questions that science cannot answer without evidence.

And I had spent enough time reading strange literature to appreciate the value of an outrageous possibility.

What if some Neanderthals had survived?

Not merely through their genetic contribution to modern humanity.

As a separate population.

What if they'd withdrawn into regions inaccessible to our ancestors?

Mountains.

Caves.

Remote territories.

Perhaps even places beneath the earth.

The idea was absurd from the standpoint of established archaeology.

But as an imaginative exercise, it opened an interesting door.

A surviving population would have had tens of thousands of years in which to develop independently.

Their culture might have become radically different from ours.

Their technologies might not resemble our technologies.

Their understanding of the world might be based upon principles we'd never considered.

And perhaps, after witnessing the behaviour of *Homo sapiens* over thousands of years, they would have very good reasons for remaining concealed.

Our species has an unfortunate history of treating unfamiliar populations as threats, resources or obstacles.

A hidden population might reasonably conclude that secrecy was preferable to contact.

Especially if it had already experienced the consequences of competition with our ancestors.

I found myself smiling at the thought.

Perhaps the Neanderthals hadn't lost the evolutionary contest after all.

Perhaps they'd simply declined to participate.

While *Homo sapiens* built empires, invented financial markets, fought wars and developed increasingly elaborate methods of destroying the environment, the other people had gone somewhere else.

And developed something entirely different.

A civilisation that didn't require endless expansion.

A society that measured success not through accumulation, but through continuity.

Survival.

Equilibrium.

The maintenance of conditions under which life could flourish.

No stock exchanges.

No economic growth targets.

No advertising campaigns persuading people to purchase things they didn't need.

Perhaps no publishing industry.

That last possibility was particularly attractive.

Of course, there was a problem.

Where could such a population have gone?

The surface of the Earth has been extensively explored.

Large populations require resources.

They leave traces.

Even sophisticated concealment would present formidable practical difficulties.

And the idea of a vast subterranean civilisation raises enormous geological, ecological and technological questions.

The Earth isn't a hollow shell containing an enormous hidden world.

We know a great deal about its internal structure.

But there are caves.

Underground waterways.

Complex geological systems.

And enormous areas of the planet that remain difficult to investigate directly.

None of this constitutes evidence for hidden Neanderthals.

Nevertheless, I began thinking about the old stories of subterranean peoples.

The inhabitants of hidden kingdoms.

The beings who emerge from hills.

The fairy folk who dwell beneath the earth.

The mysterious visitors who appear unexpectedly and then vanish.

Could these stories be interpreted through the lens of an alternative human history?

Not necessarily as literal records.

Perhaps as fragments of a much older imaginative tradition.

Or perhaps, within the framework of a speculative narrative, as distorted accounts of encounters with a concealed population.

The idea had a certain elegance.

It brought together archaeology, folklore and the modern UFO phenomenon without requiring interstellar travel.

The visitors wouldn't need to cross the galaxy.

They would already be here.

And perhaps they had been here longer than us.

I sat beside the water at Mill Carr for some time.

The sound of the little dam continued.

The river flowed.

The surrounding woodland remained indifferent to my specu-

lations.

I thought about the man and woman from London.

Their expensive car.

Their professional lives.

Their familiarity with Machen and Beardsley.

The slight awkwardness when I'd mentioned a portal opening and a Neanderthal stepping through.

Perhaps the man had been right to look uncomfortable.

There was no reason to suppose that reality occasionally malfunctioned in such a convenient fashion.

And yet the idea amused me.

What would happen if one of those ancient people really did appear beside Lynford Water?

Not as a ghost.

Not as a hallucination.

A living Neanderthal.

Standing on the path.

Looking at the lake.

Would the visitors recognise what they were seeing?

Would they assume he was an actor?

A historical re-enactor?

Some eccentric participating in an elaborate practical joke?

Would somebody photograph him?

Would the image circulate on social media?

And how long would it take before somebody announced that the entire incident had been generated by artificial intelligence?

Probably not very long.

Modern civilisation has developed a remarkable capacity for absorbing almost anything into its existing categories.

Even an impossible visitor might become merely another item in the endless flow of digital entertainment.

I wondered whether that was part of the problem.

Perhaps we were no longer capable of noticing what lay outside our expectations.

Not because anything inexplicable was necessarily happening around us.

But because our attention had become so fragmented that we barely noticed the ordinary world.

The Neanderthals, whatever else they may have been, could hardly have afforded that luxury.

Their survival depended upon noticing things.

Tracks.

Sounds.

Weather.

Animal behaviour.

Changes in the landscape.

They inhabited an environment in which attention mattered.

And I suspected that modern humans had lost something important in exchanging that relationship with the world for the comforts of civilisation.

Eventually I got up and continued walking.

The water remained behind me.

The trees closed around the path.

Somewhere beyond the woodland lay the modern world.

Cars.

Shops.

Houses.

People going about their business.

And a tea hut selling excellent cakes.

I thought again about the strange cries I'd heard near Croxton.

There was no reason to connect them with Neanderthals.

None whatsoever.

But imagination doesn't operate according to the rules of archaeological evidence.

It makes associations.

Constructs possibilities.

Tests ideas.

Sometimes those ideas lead nowhere.

Sometimes they become stories.

And occasionally, perhaps, they encourage us to notice something we'd previously overlooked.

I was beginning to think that the woodwoses of medieval England might provide an interesting next step.

Wild men.

Hairy figures.

Humanlike beings inhabiting the margins of civilisation.

Carved into the churches of Suffolk.

Recorded in stories.

Still allegedly encountered in the forests of East Anglia.

Perhaps the Neanderthals had nothing to do with them.

Almost certainly, from the standpoint of conventional history.
But the resemblance was sufficiently intriguing to warrant a
little exploration.

And there was something else.

A medieval account from Suffolk concerning two children who
appeared from nowhere.

Their skin was green.

They spoke an unknown language.

And they claimed to come from a country unlike any known to
the people who discovered them.

One of the children survived.

She learned English.

Her green complexion disappeared.

And she eventually married.

That last detail particularly interested me.

Because whatever else the story might mean, it suggested
something difficult to dismiss.

A visitor from another world had become part of ordinary hu-
man society.

Not through conquest.

Not through revelation.

Through marriage.

I found myself wondering whether the people of Woolpit had
ever considered the implications.

And whether anybody had attempted to trace her descendants.

It was a question worth pursuing.

But first there were the wild men.

The woodwoses.

The strange figures lurking in the medieval imagination.

And, perhaps, in the forests themselves.

I returned to my car.

There was still time for a coffee.

And possibly a cake.

After all, civilisation has its advantages.

End of Chapter Two

CHAPTER THREE: THE WILD MEN IN THE CHURCHES

There are some very strange people in Suffolk churches.

I don't mean the congregations.

Although I've met a few unusual characters in churches over the years, generally while wandering around graveyards, examining medieval carvings or looking for something that caught my attention.

No, I'm talking about the wild men.

Hairy creatures, generally naked, sometimes carrying enormous clubs, occasionally fighting dragons or lions.

They're known as woodwoses.

And for reasons that aren't entirely clear, medieval Suffolk appears to have been particularly fond of them.

You can find these creatures carved into church porches, baptismal fonts and other architectural features, sometimes in remarkably good condition.

At first glance, they're rather comical.

A hairy fellow with a club.

A medieval Bigfoot.

But the more I thought about them, the more peculiar they became.

Because these weren't carvings on the walls of taverns or in the homes of people telling stories around the fire.

They were inside Christian churches.

Places of worship.

Buildings dedicated to a religion that had spent centuries attempting to establish its authority over the beliefs and practices of earlier populations.

And there, staring back at the congregation, was a hairy wild man.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I found myself wondering.

It was a perfectly reasonable question.

In 2018, I undertook a small tour of Suffolk churches in search of woodwoses.

I can't now remember exactly which ones I visited.

Peasenhall, certainly a strong possibility.

Walberswick, perhaps.

Sibton.

Possibly Yaxley.

I visited a number of churches during that period, and the individual journeys have become mixed together in my memory.

This is one of the difficulties with reconstructing the past.

We like to imagine that memory is a recording device.

It isn't.

It's a reconstruction.

Every time we remember something, we're assembling an account from fragments, associations and whatever details happen to remain accessible.

The result may be broadly accurate.

But the order of events, the precise locations and the smaller details can become uncertain.

So I won't pretend to remember standing before a particular carving when I don't.

What I do remember is the general experience.

Driving through Suffolk.

Following country lanes.

Arriving at old churches.

Wandering around the buildings, sometimes finding them open, sometimes having to content myself with the exterior.

And looking for the wild men.

It was a peculiar sort of expedition.

Most people visiting Suffolk churches are interested in architecture, local history, stained glass or perhaps tracing their ancestors.

I was looking for hairy men with clubs.

Which, come to think of it, is a perfectly respectable antiquarian pursuit.

One of the most striking examples is at St Michael's Church in Peasenhall.

There, on the medieval porch, a woodwose confronts a wyvern.

A wyvern is a dragonlike creature, generally depicted with two legs rather than the four commonly associated with dragons.

The woodwose has his club.

The wyvern has its formidable appearance.

And the two seem poised for combat.

It's a curious image to find above the entrance to a Christian

church.

“Now then,” I imagined myself asking the medieval mason, “what exactly is going on here?”

The mason, naturally, would have had an explanation.

Perhaps the wild man represented humanity in its untamed condition.

Perhaps the dragon represented evil.

Perhaps the scene illustrated the struggle between the natural world and spiritual corruption.

Or perhaps the design was simply fashionable.

Medieval craftsmen had access to a rich vocabulary of fantastic creatures.

Dragons.

Lions.

Griffins.

Wild men.

Strange hybrid beasts.

The church was not merely a place of religious instruction. It was also an enormous visual environment, filled with symbols that modern visitors often struggle to interpret.

But the woodwose interested me more than the dragon.

Dragons are hardly everyday creatures.

Nobody expects to encounter one while walking to the village shop.

The woodwose, on the other hand, looks almost plausible.

Not necessarily as depicted, of course.

But as a category of being.

A wild human.

A person living beyond ordinary society.

A creature that resembles us sufficiently to be recognisable, yet differs enough to cause alarm.

That was the interesting part.

The woodwose wasn't completely alien.

He was uncomfortably familiar.

At Yaxley, another medieval carving depicts a woodwose confronting a lion.

Elsewhere on the porch appears another armed figure facing a dragonlike creature.

Lions, dragons and wild men.

Quite a collection.

And it made me wonder about lions.

When did people in Britain first know about them?

Obviously, there haven't been wild lions roaming Suffolk during recorded medieval history.

But lions were hardly unknown to the English.

They appeared in biblical accounts, heraldry, classical stories and imported artistic traditions.

Kings and wealthy rulers sometimes kept exotic animals.

The Tower of London had its famous royal menagerie.

So medieval craftsmen didn't need to have encountered a lion in person to carve one.

Still, I liked the juxtaposition.

The lion was an exotic creature, but a real one.

The dragon was a creature of legend.

And the woodwose stood somewhere between them.

A creature that might be imaginary.

Or might be a distorted representation of something real.

Perhaps that was why the wild men interested me more than the dragons.

They occupied the uncertain territory between zoology and folklore.

And uncertainty, as I'd discovered over the years, could be a remarkably productive place to spend one's time.

I began making a list of Suffolk churches associated with wood-
wose carvings.

Peasenhall.

Covehithe.

Mendlesham.

Badlingham.

Chediston.

Sibton.

Saxmundham.

Cratfield.

Walberswick.

Ipswich.

Alderton.

Yaxley.

Newbourne.

Barking.

Middleton.

Woolpit.

Wickham Skeith.

An impressive collection.

Not every identification was equally secure. Some carvings were badly worn, others damaged, and occasionally it wasn't entirely clear what the original figure had represented.

But the distribution was remarkable.

Here were wild men scattered across the churches of eastern England.

Not hidden away in obscure manuscripts.

Carved into buildings that had stood at the centre of village life for centuries.

People would have seen them regularly.

Children would have grown up with them.

Generations would have been baptised beneath or beside these strange figures.

And I wondered what the villagers thought.

Did they recognise the woodwose as a purely symbolic creature?

Did they know stories about wild men living in the surrounding countryside?

Did somebody occasionally claim to have encountered one?

And if so, would anybody have bothered writing it down?

We tend to imagine that history consists of everything that happened before we were born.

But it doesn't.

History, as we generally encounter it, consists of the things that happened to be recorded, preserved and subsequently discovered.

The overwhelming majority of human experience has vanished.

Conversations.

Rumours.

Local stories.

Odd encounters.

Things seen briefly in the woods.

Things heard after dark.

A farmer might have returned home one evening and told his family that he'd seen something peculiar near the edge of the forest.

Perhaps they laughed.

Perhaps they believed him.

Perhaps somebody mentioned it in the village the following day.

And then?

Nothing.

No newspaper report.

No police statement.

No social media post.

No permanent record.

The story might survive as local folklore.

Or disappear entirely.

I thought again about the cries I'd heard near Croxton.

Had something similar happened centuries earlier?

A man standing at the edge of a woodland, listening to sounds he couldn't identify.

Perhaps he'd gone home and told his family.

And perhaps that had been the end of it.

There was, of course, a perfectly respectable explanation for the woodwoses.

Medieval Christianity inherited and adapted an enormous collection of images from classical, biblical and European traditions.

The wild man was a recognised figure in medieval art.

He could represent humanity outside civilisation.

The untamed natural world.

The passions.

Disorder.

Sometimes he functioned as a heraldic supporter.

Sometimes as a figure of strength.

Sometimes as a warning.

At Cratfield, the church's own interpretation of a wild man fighting a dragon places the image within a Christian symbolic framework.

Fair enough.

But I was interested in something slightly different.

Not what the woodwose was supposed to mean.

Why had medieval people found the idea of a wild human being so compelling in the first place?

It was a distinction worth making.

An image can have an established symbolic meaning while also drawing upon much older fears, experiences or imaginative traditions.

Consider the dragon.

In Christian art, dragons often represent evil or the Devil.

But dragons existed in stories long before Christianity.

The religious interpretation didn't necessarily create the creature.

It adopted it.

Perhaps something similar had happened with the woodwose.

The Church had incorporated a familiar figure from the wider imagination and given it a place within its own symbolic universe.

That didn't mean wild men actually inhabited medieval Suffolk.

But it did suggest that the idea of such beings was sufficiently familiar to be useful.

And that interested me.

Covehithe was another curious location.

A village on the Suffolk coast, threatened by the relentless advance of the North Sea.

There, the enormous ruined medieval church stands around the smaller building that replaced it.

It's a remarkable sight.

The remains of a grand religious structure surrounding a much more modest successor.

Civilisation contracting within its own ruins.

The baptismal font has been associated with damaged woodwose figures, their heads apparently deliberately removed.

One interpretation is that the carvings were attacked during periods of religious iconoclasm.

That would be entirely plausible in a region where religious images suffered extensive destruction.

But without specific documentary evidence for the damage, I wouldn't claim to know precisely who had done it or why.

Still, the image was irresistible.

Wild men carved into a Christian font.

And then, centuries later, somebody apparently deciding that these figures had no business being there.

“Off with their heads.”

The woodwoses had survived in stone.

But not entirely.

There was something almost comic about the possibility that a medieval wild man could become the target of a later religious reformer.

As though the creature had committed some offence simply by existing.

And then I began thinking about the actual destruction of images.

A carving might survive for centuries.

Then a new religious or political movement arrives.

Suddenly the old images become unacceptable.

They must be removed.

Destroyed.

Forgotten.

Human history is full of such episodes.

One generation’s sacred symbol becomes another generation’s idol.

And sometimes the people responsible for the destruction are convinced they’re improving the world.

The woodwose, meanwhile, loses his head.

I was reminded of a carving at Santon Downham.

There’s a strange creature on one of the exterior walls of the church.

I've looked at it and wondered what it represents.

A lion, perhaps.

Or something else entirely.

Time and weather have not necessarily made the identification easier.

One of the difficulties with medieval carvings is that they don't always resemble the creatures they're supposed to depict.

A lion carved by somebody who had never seen a living lion might look rather unlike a lion.

The artist may have worked from another image.

Which may itself have been copied from an earlier image.

And so on.

Eventually the representation acquires a life of its own.

The original animal becomes almost irrelevant.

I wondered whether something similar could happen with reports of unusual creatures.

Somebody sees something.

Describes it.

Another person repeats the description.

A third adds a detail.

An artist produces an illustration.

And before long, the creature has acquired a standard appearance that may bear only a distant relationship to whatever inspired the original account.

That, after all, is how folklore develops.

Not necessarily through deliberate deception.

But through the ordinary processes of human communication.

Memory.

Imagination.

Expectation.

Repetition.

And occasionally a little embellishment.

I was hardly in a position to complain.

I was considering writing about surviving Neanderthals inhabiting a hidden world beneath England.

There was another aspect of the woodwose tradition that interested me.

The wild men weren't always alone.

There were wild women too.

Sometimes medieval art depicted entire families of wild people.

Men.

Women.

Children.

This changed the character of the imagery.

A solitary hairy figure carrying a club could be interpreted as a monster.

Or a symbolic embodiment of savagery.

But a family suggested something different.

A population.

A society.

Another kind of humanity.

Perhaps they had their own customs.

Their own relationships.

Their own ways of living.

Perhaps the wild man wasn't wild from his own point of view.

Perhaps he simply belonged to a culture unfamiliar to the people who depicted him.

This was an interesting reversal.

We tend to describe people as primitive when their behaviour differs substantially from our own.

But primitive according to whom?

A modern city dweller might consider a hunter living in the forest primitive.

The hunter might regard the city dweller as a helpless creature who couldn't survive three days without a supermarket.

Both would have a point.

And both might be wrong.

The distinction between civilisation and wilderness is often less straightforward than it appears.

I returned to the Neanderthals.

Those ancient inhabitants of East Anglia.

The mammoth hunters of Lynford.

What would they have looked like to a medieval Suffolk villager?

Not necessarily like the exaggerated cavemen of nineteenth-century illustrations.

Neanderthals were human relatives with recognisably human bodies and faces, although their anatomy differed from ours in important ways.

They were generally robust.

They had prominent brow ridges.

Their skulls and facial structures were distinctive.

But they weren't covered in fur like bears.

There is no good evidence that they were the shaggy, club-wielding monsters of popular imagination.

That was worth remembering.

If I wanted to connect Neanderthals with woodwoses, I would have to account for the differences.

Perhaps the medieval imagery was heavily stylised.

Perhaps the wild man's hairiness represented something symbolic rather than anatomical.

Perhaps the entire connection was imaginary.

Most likely, from a conventional historical standpoint.

Nevertheless, I found the possibility entertaining.

Imagine a small surviving population of Neanderthals living in remote woodland.

Occasionally somebody encounters one.

The story circulates.

Over generations, the details change.

The stranger becomes increasingly hairy.

Increasingly wild.

Increasingly unlike ordinary humanity.

Eventually he appears in church carvings carrying a club.

A distorted recollection of another human population.

It was a compelling story.

But the problem was obvious.

The last known Neanderthal populations had disappeared tens of thousands of years before these medieval carvings were made.

There was an enormous chronological gap.

And no established evidence connecting the two.

A scientist would quite reasonably dismiss the proposition as unsupported.

I wouldn't argue.

But I was beginning to think there might be another way of approaching the question.

What if the woodwoose wasn't a memory of Neanderthals?

What if it was an occasional encounter with them?

That was a much more outrageous possibility.

And therefore, from the standpoint of speculative fiction, considerably more interesting.

The East Anglian Daily Times had published an article in its Weird Suffolk series about the wild men of the woods.

The journalist Stacia Briggs and her colleagues had explored the medieval carvings and the folklore surrounding them.

They also mentioned accounts of people experiencing an unusual sense of presence in the countryside.

That interested me.

A sense of presence is a curious phenomenon.

People sometimes report feeling that somebody or something is nearby, even when they cannot see or hear anyone.

Such experiences can arise through perfectly ordinary psychological and neurological processes.

Fatigue.

Expectation.

Isolation.

Anxiety.

Environmental conditions.

The brain is continually constructing a model of the world, including the possible presence of other beings.

Sometimes that model produces a compelling impression without an identifiable external cause.

But the experience itself can be remarkably convincing.

I've had moments in lonely places when I've felt that something was watching me.

That doesn't mean anything actually was.

It means I experienced the sensation.

And I think it's important to preserve that distinction.

At the same time, such feelings can influence how we interpret a landscape.

A woodland becomes something more than a collection of trees.

A quiet lane acquires a peculiar atmosphere.

An old churchyard begins to feel inhabited by more than the living.

The physical environment hasn't necessarily changed.

But the consciousness experiencing it has.

And sometimes that's enough to create an entirely different world.

Dragons presented another interesting problem.

The woodwoses of Suffolk frequently appeared alongside creatures that belonged to the medieval imagination.

Wyverns.

Lions.

Dragonlike beasts.

Now, lions were real animals, even if they weren't native to medieval England.

Wyverns and dragons belonged to legend.

But what exactly was a dragon?

The word derives through Latin *draco* from Greek *drakōn*, associated with serpents and dragonlike creatures.

Across different cultures, dragons acquired a bewildering variety of forms.

Some flew.

Some lived in water.

Some guarded treasures.

Some represented chaos.

Others possessed wisdom or supernatural powers.

They were remarkably adaptable beings.

And they continued evolving.

I remembered something from Michael Moorcock's Elric stories—or perhaps another of his connected works.

A marvellous idea involving dragons and the Battle of Britain.

As I remembered it, dragons had flown across the English Channel and helped save the country during the Second World War.

I couldn't now place the precise passage, and memory may have embroidered it.

But I loved the idea.

The RAF struggling against the Luftwaffe.

Spitfires and Hurricanes climbing into the summer sky.

Radar stations tracking incoming aircraft.

And then, from somewhere beyond ordinary history, dragons

appearing over the Channel.

One could almost imagine the Air Ministry attempting to classify the incident.

“Unidentified aerial creatures, sir.”

“German?”

“Uncertain, sir.”

“Well, are they ours?”

“Apparently.”

I wanted that story to be true.

Not because there was any historical evidence for dragons participating in the Battle of Britain.

But because it was such a magnificent intrusion of myth into modern history.

The sort of thing that ought to happen occasionally.

If I controlled the Simulation, it certainly would.

And that brought me back to the woodwoses.

What if the old stories were not simply memories of things that had happened?

What if they were also possibilities waiting to happen?

This was an idea I'd encountered in various forms through fiction, philosophy and occult literature.

The imagination doesn't merely reproduce the world.

It generates models of worlds that might exist.

Sometimes those models influence human behaviour.

Sometimes they become religious beliefs.

Sometimes political movements.

Sometimes works of art.

And sometimes they inspire people to go looking for things.

A man reads about wild people inhabiting forests.

Years later, he hears strange cries in the darkness.

The old story returns.

Not necessarily because the story explains the experience.

But because it provides one possible framework for interpreting it.

Another person, unfamiliar with the folklore, might hear precisely the same sounds and think of an injured animal.

A third might suspect military activity.

A fourth might conclude that somebody was playing a practical joke.

Same sounds.

Different interpretations.

Which raises an awkward question.

How much of what we call reality is the world itself?

And how much is the model we're using to interpret it?

I wasn't suggesting that physical reality simply obeyed our beliefs.

You cannot make a dragon appear over Suffolk merely by wishing for one.

At least, I've never managed it.

But our experience of reality is unquestionably shaped by attention, expectation, memory and imagination.

And that means uncertainty is not merely an inconvenience.

It's a necessary part of investigating anything unfamiliar.

There was something else about the medieval wild men that bothered me.

Their relationship with Christianity.

If the woodwose represented disorder, savagery or the untamed passions, why place him so prominently on the church?

Why give him such a substantial physical presence?

One answer was that medieval art frequently represented evil or disorder precisely to demonstrate its defeat by Christian virtue.

A wild man fighting a dragon might symbolise the struggle against evil.

Or the transformation of untamed humanity through religion.

But some woodwoses seemed to possess a vitality that went beyond simple moral instruction.

They were powerful.

Confident.

Sometimes almost heroic.

And they appeared in places where ordinary villagers would encounter them repeatedly.

I began imagining the conversations that might have taken place.

A child points towards a carving.

“What’s that, Father?”

“A wild man.”

“Where does he live?”

“In the woods.”

“Have you seen one?”

“No.”

“Has anybody?”

And perhaps the father pauses.

Because somebody in the village once claimed to have seen something.

Or perhaps his grandfather told him a story.

Or perhaps the whole thing was simply a familiar legend.

We cannot recover those conversations.

But it's reasonable to suppose that the carvings encouraged questions.

Images have a way of doing that.

Especially strange ones.

I thought again about my tour of the Suffolk churches in 2018.

The driving.

The quiet villages.

The old buildings.

The carvings.

The peculiar pleasure of searching for something that most visitors probably overlooked.

There was no dramatic revelation.

No wild man appeared in the churchyard.

No mysterious figure emerged from behind a gravestone.

I didn't hear strange calls from the surrounding woods.

Nothing happened that couldn't be explained through ordinary experience.

And that was fine.

Not every investigation needs an anomalous event.

Sometimes the anomaly is simply the persistence of an idea.

A hairy humanlike creature appears in medieval art.

Centuries pass.

The carvings survive.

Then, in the twenty-first century, people begin reporting large hairy figures in the forests of East Anglia.

The modern witnesses call them Bigfoot.

The medieval craftsmen called them woodwoses.

The resemblance is intriguing.

But resemblance isn't identity.

We don't know whether the modern reports concern misidentified animals, unusual people, hoaxes, perceptual errors or something else.

And we certainly cannot conclude that they involve a surviving population of prehistoric humans.

Nevertheless, the two traditions now coexist.

The medieval carvings.

The contemporary reports.

And somewhere between them lies the possibility of a story.

I began to wonder whether the Neanderthals, if they had survived, would necessarily resemble the creatures depicted in the churches.

Perhaps not.

Perhaps a population that had continued evolving for tens of thousands of years would have become substantially different from its ancestors.

Evolution doesn't stop merely because a species withdraws from competition with another population.

Changes in environment, diet, social organisation and reproductive patterns can all influence the direction of evolutionary development.

And culture can change far more rapidly than biology.

What if the surviving Neanderthals had developed an advanced civilisation?

Not a civilisation resembling ours.

Something fundamentally different.

Perhaps they had abandoned the technologies of conquest and accumulation.

Perhaps they had learned to manipulate their environment with great subtlety.

Perhaps they had discovered ways of travelling that made our roads and aircraft seem primitive.

Perhaps their understanding of consciousness was so sophisticated that they could influence perception itself.

This was becoming increasingly outrageous.

I recognised that.

But I was enjoying the exercise.

The great advantage of speculative fiction is that it allows you to explore possibilities without pretending you've established them as facts.

And the hypothesis was beginning to acquire a certain internal coherence.

If another human population had survived in concealment, it might occasionally have been encountered.

Those encounters could have generated folklore.

As the hidden population developed, the nature of the encounters might have changed.

Wild men in medieval forests.

Strange visitors from underground kingdoms.

Fairies.

Unusual aerial phenomena.

Modern UFO occupants.

Different appearances.

Different cultural interpretations.

But perhaps, within the fictional model, a single underlying population.

It was a bold proposition.

And there was absolutely no reason to believe it.

Not yet.

I found myself returning to a particular question.

Why would an advanced hidden civilisation remain concealed?

Fear seemed an obvious possibility.

Our species had a long history of responding violently to unfamiliar populations.

Competition for resources.

Territorial disputes.

Religious differences.

Racial prejudice.

The classification of other people as inferior or dangerous.

If another intelligent human population had witnessed this behaviour over thousands of years, it might reasonably conclude that open contact was unwise.

Especially if its ancestors had once suffered from competition with *Homo sapiens*.

Perhaps concealment was not a sign of weakness.

Perhaps it was a deliberate strategy.

And perhaps the occasional appearances of strange beings were not accidents.

Perhaps they were part of a programme.

A gradual introduction.

A means of familiarising humanity with the possibility that other intelligent populations existed.

Not necessarily extraterrestrials.

Not gods.

Not demons.

Just other people.

Different people.

People whose ancestors had shared the Earth with ours.

I imagined a hidden Neanderthal official examining reports of human reactions to anomalous encounters.

“How are they progressing?”

“Slowly.”

“Still frightened?”

“Some of them.”

“Still trying to shoot everything?”

“Unfortunately.”

“And the others?”

“They’re making television programmes.”

“Good heavens.”

“Some believe we’re from another galaxy.”

“Excellent. That should keep them occupied.”

I laughed to myself.

The idea was absurd.

But it had possibilities.

There was one Suffolk story that seemed particularly relevant.

A story recorded during the Middle Ages.

Two children had appeared near the village of Woolpit.

Their skin was green.

They spoke a language nobody recognised.

And they claimed to come from a country where the light was different from that of our world.

One of the children died.

The other survived.

She learned English.

Her green complexion gradually disappeared.

And, according to one medieval chronicler, she eventually married.

I had known the story since childhood.

I'd read it long before moving to East Anglia, probably in one of the books that had introduced me to the strange parallels between folklore and modern UFO encounters.

Woolpit remains on my list of places to revisit with the Green Children particularly in mind.

It's one thing to read a medieval account. Quite another to stand in the landscape where the story supposedly began.

I don't expect to discover an entrance to Hyperborea.

But I wouldn't rule out finding a good cup of coffee and something interesting to think about.

Because the Green Children presented a different kind of mystery from the woodwoses.

The wild men remained outside civilisation.

The Green Girl entered it.

She crossed the boundary.

Learned the language.

Adopted the food.

And apparently became part of ordinary English society.

That was a remarkable narrative.

And it suggested an intriguing question.

What happened to her descendants?

If she had children, did her family line continue?

Might there be people living in East Anglia today whose ancestry could, at least in legend, be traced back to the mysterious visitor?

I doubted that any reliable genealogy would establish such a connection.

But the possibility was irresistible.

And it led towards an even more outrageous thought.

What if the Green Girl had not come from another planet?

What if she had come from somewhere beneath England?

Somewhere inhabited by people whose ancestors had withdrawn from the surface world long before recorded history?

The Neanderthals.

The hidden population.

The people who had supposedly disappeared.

I looked again at the list of Suffolk churches.

Wild men.

Dragons.

Lions.

Strange creatures carved into stone.

And somewhere among them, Woolpit.

A village associated with one of the strangest stories in English folklore.

It remained a place I wanted to go back to when the opportunity arose.

But I had a feeling that the Green Children might prove rather more troublesome than the woodwoses.

After all, a hairy wild man carved into a church porch can be explained as medieval symbolism.

A green girl who marries a man from Norfolk is another matter entirely.

Especially if you begin wondering about the family tree.

And I was beginning to wonder about it a great deal.

End of Chapter Three

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MAN FROM THE SEA

The trouble with mermaids is that Disney got there first.

Mention a mermaid to somebody and there's a fair chance they'll imagine an attractive young woman with flowing hair, a fish's tail and an unusually good singing voice.

Ariel.

The Little Mermaid.

A perfectly agreeable creature, provided you don't mind the logistical complications of a romantic relationship with somebody who lives underwater.

But the older stories were rather different.

Mermaids weren't always charming.

And their male counterparts could be considerably less appealing.

In some traditions, the people of the sea were dangerous. They lured sailors to their deaths, foretold disasters or appeared as grotesque beings that had little in common with the attractive aquatic people of modern entertainment.

The sea was another world.

And anything emerging from it was potentially suspect.

Which brings us to Orford.

A small Suffolk town with a remarkable castle, a long maritime history and one of the strangest accounts in medieval English literature.

The story of a man who came from the sea.

I first encountered the Orford story as a boy.

It was in Jacques Vallée's *Passport to Magonia*, a book that had a considerable influence upon my thinking.

At the time I was immersed in the ancient astronaut hypothesis.

My father had brought home one of Erich von Däniken's books, and I'd gone on to read others.

Chariots of the Gods? had opened a vast imaginative territory.

What if the gods of antiquity had been extraterrestrial visitors?

What if ancient monuments contained evidence of advanced technologies?

What if humanity's history was considerably stranger than the textbooks suggested?

I was fascinated.

Not least because the hypothesis brought together archaeology, mythology, science fiction and the possibility that our familiar account of human civilisation was incomplete.

But Vallée offered something rather different.

He noticed that modern UFO encounters resembled much older stories.

Fairies.

Elves.

Mysterious visitors.

Strange beings who appeared unexpectedly, behaved in bewildering ways and then vanished.

Perhaps, Vallée suggested, the phenomenon was not simply a matter of extraterrestrial astronauts arriving in spacecraft.

Perhaps the relationship between humanity and these strange visitors was much older.

And perhaps the phenomenon operated in ways that challenged our assumptions about reality itself.

That was a considerable step beyond von Däniken.

Ancient astronauts were fairly straightforward.

Aliens arrived.

They possessed advanced technology.

Primitive humans mistook them for gods.

An elegant hypothesis, even if the evidence offered in its support was often considerably less impressive than the speculation.

Vallée's model was more troublesome.

The visitors didn't necessarily behave like scientists or explorers.

Sometimes they behaved like tricksters.

Their appearances changed with the culture encountering them.

And their activities often seemed designed to confuse rather than enlighten.

I liked that.

It was much closer to the strange literature I'd been reading.

Arthur Machen.

The old fairy traditions.

And, of course, Philip K. Dick.

The universe was becoming considerably less predictable.

The medieval account of the Orford creature comes from Ralph of Coggeshall, a chronicler writing around the beginning of the thirteenth century.

According to his account, fishermen caught a strange human-like creature in their nets off the Suffolk coast.

The creature was brought ashore.

It resembled a man, but was covered in hair and possessed features that marked it as something unusual.

It could not—or would not—speak.

The local authorities kept it in custody.

Attempts were made to discover what it was and whether it could communicate.

Eventually it was allowed into the sea under supervision.

And it escaped.

Swimming away, never to be recovered.

That, in essence, is the story.

The details are remarkable enough without adding anything to them.

A humanlike being emerges from the sea.

It is captured.

Confined.

Examined.

And eventually escapes back into the world from which it came.

I wondered what the creature made of the experience.

Assuming there was a creature.

And assuming it possessed anything resembling human consciousness.

Imagine being caught in a net, dragged into an unfamiliar environment and surrounded by people whose language you cannot understand.

They stare at you.

Touch you.

Attempt to communicate.

Perhaps they decide you're an animal.

Perhaps they decide you're a man.

Perhaps they can't make up their minds.

And all you want is to get away.

It's not difficult to sympathise.

I visited Orford with my family, probably around 2011.

My daughters Audra and Imogen were still young.

Audra would have been about fifteen, Imogen eleven.

Their mother Nicola was with us.

We'd been together since we were quite young ourselves, and family excursions had become part of our ordinary life.

But our excursions weren't always entirely ordinary.

I had a habit of turning visits to historical places into improvised fantasy adventures.

We'd explore a castle, a ruined abbey, a strange stretch of woodland or some other interesting location, and I'd begin inventing a story.

The girls would become characters within it.

There might be monsters.

Hidden passages.

Ancient curses.

Mysterious people.

Occasionally an entire imaginary world would develop as we walked.

These were effectively live-action role-playing games, although we didn't call them that.

We simply made things up.

And the girls loved them.

So Orford Castle was an ideal setting.

A formidable medieval structure standing above the Suffolk landscape.

And associated with a creature that had supposedly been brought from the sea.

I told them the story.

The fishermen.

The nets.

The strange hairy man.

The imprisonment.

The escape.

Then I began asking questions.

"What would you do if you met him?"

The girls considered the matter.

I elaborated.

Not a friendly cartoon mermaid.

Not Ariel.

A real merman.

Something emerging from the depths.

Wet.

Hairy.

Humanlike, but not quite human.

A creature that might have spent its entire life in an environment completely alien to ours.

“What would you do if he came towards you?”

The reaction was immediate.

Horror.

They wanted nothing to do with him.

I was delighted.

The story had worked.

Orford Castle had become more than a historical monument.

It was now part of an imaginary world in which strange beings might emerge from the sea.

And we were temporarily inhabiting that world.

I sometimes wonder whether children are better equipped than adults to explore such possibilities.

Not because they necessarily believe everything.

Children can be remarkably sceptical.

But they're often willing to enter an imaginary situation without constantly interrupting it to demand proof.

They understand the rules of play.

A monster can exist for the duration of an adventure.

A castle can become a fortress under siege.

A woodland can contain beings that nobody has ever seen.

And when the game ends, everybody returns to ordinary life.

No problem.

Adults often find this more difficult.

They want to establish whether the monster is real.

Or dismiss it as nonsense.

Or explain what it symbolises.

All perfectly respectable activities.

But sometimes they prevent us from exploring the imaginative possibilities of an experience.

I've always been inclined to enter the story first.

See where it goes.

And decide afterwards what, if anything, it might mean.

Which may explain why I wasn't particularly frightened by some of the stranger things I've encountered.

Even when other people were.

When I was eighteen, I lived in a bedsit in Bristol.

Fishponds Road.

Not a particularly glamorous arrangement.

But I was young, interested in music, books and the various possibilities of life, and had no great desire to enter conventional employment.

I was on the dole.

Which, from my point of view, provided a modest income while leaving me free to pursue my interests.

I wasn't alone in this arrangement.

In the bedsit below mine lived a man called Mervyn.

He was around thirty-seven.

At eighteen, that seemed practically ancient.

Mervyn was divorced and down on his luck.

He was also unemployed.

We got along well enough.

Neither of us possessed much money.

And occasionally we found ourselves in the awkward position of having spent rather more than we should have.

Food could become a problem.

Not starvation, exactly.

But the sort of situation in which you begin considering unconventional methods of obtaining a decent meal.

Across Fishponds Road was a park.

Beyond it stretched a green corridor leading out towards Frenchay.

There were fields.

And in one of those fields, potatoes.

Mervyn and I knew about the potatoes.

And eventually we decided that the farmer probably wouldn't miss a few.

Now, I wouldn't recommend helping yourself to somebody else's crops.

It was theft, however modest our intentions.

But needs must when the Devil drives.

And the Devil, on this occasion, was apparently driving us towards a field of potatoes.

We set off at around eleven o'clock at night.

Which tells you something about our criminal abilities.

We were so conscious of doing something wrong that we'd decided to undertake the expedition at an hour when nobody was likely to see us.

Two unemployed men embarking upon a nocturnal agricultural raid.

Hardly the stuff of organised crime.

We walked along the green corridor, through the parkland and towards the fields.

Eventually we reached our destination.

There were the potatoes.

We helped ourselves.

And began the long journey home.

By then it was after midnight.

We had a torch, although we didn't use it continuously.

The route took us along footpaths and through wooded areas.

Eventually we approached the park near Fishponds Road.

There was a large lake.

And that's where we saw her.

A woman.

Dressed entirely in white.

Long black hair.

A very pale face.

She was moving across the lake.

Not swimming.

Not walking along the bank.

Apparently floating over the water.

Both Mervyn and I saw her.

For a moment I simply watched.

She was quite a sight.

A pale woman in white, with long dark hair, apparently gliding across the surface of a lake in the middle of the night.

She would have made an excellent frontwoman for a gothic rock band.

Bauhaus might have had to reconsider their position.

I found her fascinating.

And, I must confess, rather attractive.

Had the circumstances been slightly different, I might have attempted to introduce myself.

“Good evening. Lovely night for floating across a lake.”

But Mervyn had other ideas.

He was terrified.

He grabbed my arm.

And ran.

So I ran too.

Not because I was particularly frightened.

But because Mervyn was pulling me along.

We left the lake behind.

And that was that.

Mervyn remained shaken by the experience.

He’d seen what appeared to be a ghost.

And he wasn’t happy about it.

I was less concerned.

I didn’t know what we’d seen.

Perhaps there was some ordinary explanation.

An unusual arrangement of light and shadow.

A person moving along a partially concealed bank.

Some feature of the landscape that created an impression of

floating.

There was a psychiatric institution in the wider area, and I briefly wondered whether somebody might have wandered away from it.

But none of these possibilities explained what we'd actually perceived.

A woman in white.

Moving across the lake.

Apparently without touching the water.

The important word is apparently.

I couldn't establish what was physically happening.

Only what it looked like.

And it looked unlike anything I had expected.

So I filed the experience away.

Another strange occurrence.

Another unanswered question.

And another reminder that the world occasionally produces scenes that would seem perfectly at home in a supernatural novel.

About a year later, I was still living in the same place.

I was nineteen.

Playing in bands.

Trying to make something happen in the music business.

And generally pursuing a lifestyle that didn't involve much long-term planning.

One of my friends was a bass player.

I remember his nickname.

Parrot.

His real name has disappeared into the mists of time.

One evening we went out drinking.

And got spectacularly drunk.

Eventually we found ourselves outside an old church.

It was no longer being used for worship.

Instead, it had become a venue for events.

We could hear music coming from inside.

A heavy rumble of bass.

Naturally, we went in.

I can't now remember precisely who was performing.

It may have been Alien Sex Fiend.

Perhaps Southern Death Cult, the early incarnation of what would become The Cult.

The details have become blurred.

Which is hardly surprising given our condition.

But the place was full of goths.

And I was in my element.

I lost track of Parrot.

And began talking to various young women.

I wasn't particularly attempting to chat them up.

At least, that wasn't how I understood it.

I was simply talking.

Although being drunk, I became rather more forward than usual.

At some point the conversations progressed to kissing.

Three girls, as I recall.

I was behaving rather like a young Lord Byron.

Or at least what I imagined Lord Byron might have behaved like after consuming an unreasonable quantity of alcohol.

The girls seemed happy enough with the immediate excitement.

Whether they would have wanted to see me again is another question.

A wildly enthusiastic young man at a gothic music event might be entertaining for an evening.

But perhaps not the ideal prospect for a serious relationship.

Anyway, I was enjoying myself.

And completely unaware that somebody was watching.

Eventually I noticed her.

A young woman dressed entirely in black.

Long black skirt.

Clothing that seemed almost Victorian.

Very pale face.

Long black hair.

She was striking.

Not simply because of her appearance.

There was something about her manner.

A quietness.

A certain decorum.

She seemed entirely composed.

And she was watching me with an expression of amusement.

I later learned that she'd been observing my antics for some

time.

What caught me was that she reminded me of the woman
Mervyn and I had seen apparently floating across the lake.

Not identical, necessarily.

But remarkably similar in appearance.

The pale face.

The long black hair.

The old-fashioned quality.

The sense that she belonged to another time.

Except this woman was dressed in black rather than white.

And she was standing in a church.

Not floating across a lake.

I approached her.

But something interesting happened.

Despite being drunk, I instinctively moderated my behaviour.

I wasn't going to behave towards her as I'd behaved towards
the other girls.

There was something about her that demanded a different ap-
proach.

Not fear.

Respect.

Or perhaps fascination.

She seemed to know it too.

Her amusement continued.

We talked.

Her name was Laura.

And she gave me her telephone number.

Over the following weeks, I called her.

Landline, of course.

This was long before everybody carried a telephone in their pocket.

Sometimes somebody else answered.

Possibly her mother.

Then Laura would come to the phone.

We talked at length.

She had a soft, quiet voice.

Very polite.

Never loud.

Never hurried.

And she was fascinated by death.

Not merely in the fashionable gothic sense.

Her interest seemed much deeper.

She had constructed an entire personal world around it.

The clothes.

The manner.

The imagery.

The atmosphere.

She wasn't simply dressing up for a night out.

She appeared to inhabit the identity she'd created.

Eventually she invited me to visit her in Bradford-on-Avon, where she lived.

I accepted.

Naturally.
I travelled there by train.
We'd arranged to meet near a church.
In the graveyard.
An appropriate location, given Laura's interests.
I arrived and waited beside a stone wall.
Then I saw her approaching.
She was dressed in dark Victorian-style clothing.
Long skirt.
Pale face.
Long black hair.
And she was carrying a wicker basket.
She'd been shopping.
Bread.
A few groceries.
The basket completed the picture.
She looked as though she'd stepped out of the nineteenth century.
Not a modern young woman wearing vaguely gothic clothes.
A figure from another age.
The illusion was remarkably complete.
For a moment I wondered whether she might actually have come from the past.
Perhaps she'd wandered through some unnoticed opening in time.
And found herself in twentieth-century England.

It was a delightful thought.

And entirely consistent with the sort of fiction I enjoyed.

We greeted one another.

And spent time together.

I found her company fascinating.

She was unlike most people I knew.

Quiet.

Thoughtful.

Intensely interested in subjects that ordinary society generally preferred to avoid.

And completely committed to her unusual way of life.

I accepted it without difficulty.

Why shouldn't somebody construct a life around an imaginative identity?

Most people do something similar.

They simply choose less interesting identities.

Business executive.

Respectable professional.

Successful entrepreneur.

Devoted follower of fashion.

Laura had chosen something considerably more imaginative.

She was a vampire.

Not merely somebody who enjoyed vampire films.

Not simply a fan of gothic music.

She regarded herself as a real vampire.

At least, that was how she presented herself to me.

And she'd developed the identity with meticulous attention to detail.

I don't recall her demonstrating supernatural powers.

Nor did I witness anything that established she possessed an unusual biological condition.

There was no evidence that she was literally an immortal creature of the night.

But that wasn't really the point.

She inhabited the role so completely that it became difficult to separate the person from the identity.

And I was quite happy to accept her on those terms.

Why insist upon dragging everything back into the pedestrian world?

If somebody wishes to live as a vampire, and isn't harming anybody, that's their business.

In fact, I found Laura considerably more interesting than many of the people who considered themselves entirely normal.

Her identity had coherence.

Style.

Imagination.

And an almost theatrical precision.

She'd created a world.

And invited me into it.

But Laura wasn't merely interested in the outward appearance of the Victorian world.

She was cultured.

Very much so.

We talked about Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, the poem

in which mysterious goblin merchants tempt two sisters with their exotic fruits.

It's a strange work.

Sensuous.

Sinister.

Full of suggestion.

The goblins themselves seem to belong to some alternative order of existence, neither entirely human nor entirely animal.

And their fruit is dangerous.

Eat it, and something changes.

Which, come to think of it, brings us rather close to the Green Children of Woolpit.

Those mysterious children had apparently been unable or unwilling to eat ordinary human food until they were offered beans.

Food as a boundary between worlds.

Food as a means of transformation.

Perhaps Christina Rossetti would have appreciated the connection.

Laura certainly appreciated such things.

We also talked about Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina's brother, and Elizabeth Siddal, the artist and model who became his wife.

Lizzy Siddal.

One of the great tragic figures of the Pre-Raphaelite world.

Her death in 1862, following an overdose of laudanum, became entangled with one of the most extraordinary episodes in Victorian literary history.

Rossetti had placed a manuscript of his poems in her coffin.

Seven years later, he arranged for the grave to be opened and the manuscript recovered.

Imagine that.

A poet burying his work with his dead wife.

Then deciding, years afterwards, that he wanted it back.

The exhumation took place at Highgate Cemetery.

And naturally, the story accumulated its own mythology.

Accounts circulated about the preservation of Siddal's body and the growth of her famous red hair.

The sort of details that belong as much to gothic fiction as to history.

The historical exhumation is documented; the more sensational details are much harder to establish.

But Laura knew these stories.

And so did I.

We could discuss them without explanation or introduction.

That was part of what made her company so enjoyable.

She wasn't somebody who'd bought a black dress, listened to a few records and decided to become a creature of the night.

She knew the literature.

The paintings.

The lives of the artists.

The peculiar entanglement of beauty, death, desire and imagination that runs through so much nineteenth-century art.

Her Victorian appearance was supported by an entire intellectual world.

And I wondered whether she'd begun with the books and gradually transformed herself into a character who might have stepped out of them.

Or whether the character had come first, leading her deeper into the literature.

Either way, the result was remarkable.

Laura wasn't merely dressing as somebody from another century.

She seemed to have made that century her natural habitat.

And when we met beside the graveyard wall in Bradford-on-Avon, with her wicker basket and dark clothing, I had the peculiar sensation that I was the visitor.

Not her.

Perhaps I'd stepped into her world.

Rather than the other way around.

I sometimes wondered about her family.

She still lived at home, as far as I could tell.

Her parents presumably knew about her interests.

Perhaps they regarded them as an eccentric phase.

Perhaps they were concerned.

Perhaps they simply accepted that their daughter was unusual.

I never knew.

Nor did I investigate.

It wasn't my place.

What interested me was Laura herself.

The way she'd constructed an identity so thoroughly that it seemed to alter the atmosphere around her.

She was, in a sense, a living work of art.

And that brought me back to the woman at the lake.

The apparent ghost.

The floating figure.

Had there been any connection?

Probably not.

There was no evidence that Laura had been present at the lake that night.

No reason to suppose she possessed supernatural abilities.

And no basis for concluding that the two women were anything other than unrelated individuals who happened to resemble one another.

But the resemblance remained in my memory.

A woman in white, apparently floating across a lake.

A woman in black, apparently belonging to another century.

One frightened Mervyn into flight.

The other invited me to visit her.

Two different encounters.

Two different reactions.

And two different ways of responding to something that didn't fit ordinary expectations.

Eventually Laura and I lost touch.

I can't remember precisely how.

I was busy with music.

Playing in bands.

Trying to turn that into a viable occupation.

There were rehearsals.

Gigs.

Other people.

Other interests.

Life moved on.

And Laura disappeared from my immediate world.

Not mysteriously.

At least, not as far as I know.

We simply stopped communicating.

But I've remembered her ever since.

The quiet voice.

The Victorian clothes.

The wicker basket.

The graveyard.

And the seriousness with which she inhabited her chosen identity.

She'd been one of the most unusual people I'd encountered.

Not because I believed she was literally a vampire.

But because she'd demonstrated how thoroughly a human being could construct an alternative reality and live within it.

And how convincing that reality could become to somebody encountering it.

Years later, standing at Orford Castle with Audra and Imogen, I thought about the strange man who'd supposedly been caught in the fishermen's nets.

What would I have done if I'd been there?

If I'd seen the creature brought ashore?

Would I have been frightened?

Would I have wanted it imprisoned?

Would I have demanded that somebody establish whether it

was human?

I suspect I'd have been curious.

I'd have wanted to observe it.

Perhaps attempt to communicate.

But I doubt I'd have been comfortable with keeping it captive.

Especially if it appeared distressed.

There was something deeply troubling about the medieval account.

The creature had been captured simply because it was unfamiliar.

Its resemblance to humanity had not guaranteed humane treatment.

Perhaps the opposite.

The authorities couldn't decide what it was.

So they confined it.

And attempted to extract an explanation.

Eventually it escaped.

I found myself hoping that the escape had been successful.

That the creature had returned to whatever world it inhabited.

And that it had warned the others.

"Don't go near the humans."

"Why?"

"They put you in castles."

This was the part of the story that connected with my increasingly extravagant Neanderthal hypothesis.

Suppose another intelligent population existed somewhere beyond ordinary human society.

Not extraterrestrials.

Not supernatural beings.

Another branch of humanity.

Perhaps descended from people who had survived the disappearance of the Neanderthals.

What would happen if one of them were discovered?

The answer, I suspected, would depend upon the circumstances.

A strange figure glimpsed in a forest might become a local legend.

A mysterious child found in a village might eventually be absorbed into society.

A humanlike creature dragged from the sea might be imprisoned.

And a sophisticated visitor capable of manipulating appearances might simply pass unnoticed.

Perhaps even live among us.

That last possibility interested me.

Because Laura had demonstrated something important.

A person could appear radically different from ordinary society without necessarily being biologically different.

She'd created an identity that made her seem almost other-worldly.

Yet she was, as far as I knew, an ordinary young woman.

A remarkably imaginative one.

But human.

What if the reverse were possible?

What if a genuinely different kind of human being learned to appear ordinary?

Adopted our clothing.

Our speech.

Our manners.

Our social conventions.

Perhaps even our professions.

Could we recognise the difference?

Or would we simply assume that the person was eccentric?

A little unusual.

Not quite like everybody else.

But fundamentally one of us.

The Green Children of Woolpit had apparently crossed that boundary.

At least in the medieval story.

The surviving girl learned English.

Her appearance changed.

She adapted to ordinary society.

And eventually married.

The Orford creature had not been so fortunate.

It had remained visibly different.

Unable or unwilling to communicate.

And therefore confined.

Two Suffolk stories.

Two encounters with apparent outsiders.

Two radically different outcomes.

And now I was considering a third possibility.

A hidden population that had learned to manage contact delib-

erately.

To control how it appeared.

To influence the expectations of those who encountered it.

Perhaps through technology.

Perhaps through psychological knowledge.

Perhaps through methods we hadn't yet imagined.

The idea was becoming increasingly speculative.

But it offered a possible explanation for one of the strangest features of anomalous encounters.

The visitors often seemed to adapt themselves to the culture of the witness.

Fairies in one century.

Airship occupants in another.

Extraterrestrials in the modern age.

Different appearances.

Similar patterns.

Perhaps the underlying phenomenon was not changing.

Perhaps our interpretation was.

Or perhaps something was deliberately presenting itself in forms we could understand.

I thought again about my daughters.

Their horrified reaction to the imagined merman.

What would they have done if something genuinely strange had appeared at Orford Castle?

Perhaps they'd have run.

Perhaps they'd have stood fascinated.

Perhaps they'd have asked questions.

Children are unpredictable.

Adults aren't much better.

And that unpredictability might be a serious problem for any concealed population considering contact with Homo sapiens.

Some humans would respond with curiosity.

Others with fear.

Others with aggression.

Some would attempt communication.

Some would attempt capture.

Some would attempt to make money.

And a few would probably ask whether the visitors had a social media account.

Perhaps the hidden people had spent thousands of years studying these reactions.

Perhaps they'd concluded that open contact was too dangerous.

And perhaps the strange appearances recorded in folklore were part of a much longer process.

A gradual acclimatisation.

A means of introducing humanity to the idea that it wasn't alone.

Not in the universe.

On Earth.

I looked out from Orford Castle towards the surrounding landscape.

The Suffolk coast lay beyond.

The sea.

The marshes.

The old military installations of Orford Ness.

A region where history, secrecy and strange stories had become thoroughly entangled.

There was no reason to suppose that Ralph of Coggeshall's creature had been a Neanderthal.

Nor that it belonged to a hidden civilisation.

The medieval account might have arisen from a misidentified animal, an unusual human being, an embellished incident or a story whose original circumstances had long since disappeared.

We couldn't know.

But the narrative remained.

A man from the sea.

Captured.

Confined.

Unable to explain himself.

And finally escaping.

I wondered what happened after he disappeared beneath the waves.

Did he return to a community?

Did he possess a language?

Did he tell others what had happened?

Or was the entire story simply a medieval curiosity, preserved because it was unusual enough to interest a chronicler?

I had no answer.

But I found myself increasingly drawn to the possibility that humanity's oldest stories might contain more than we generally allowed.

Not necessarily literal truths.

Perhaps something stranger.

Patterns.

Recurring encounters.

Fragments of an imaginative relationship with other forms of intelligence.

And perhaps, somewhere within those patterns, a clue to the question I'd begun asking at Lynford.

What if the Neanderthals had never entirely disappeared?

What if some of them had withdrawn from the surface world?

What if they'd spent tens of thousands of years developing a civilisation beyond our knowledge?

And what if, from time to time, they allowed us to see them?

A wild man in a forest.

A green child in a village.

A strange creature emerging from the sea.

The idea was absurd.

But it was beginning to possess a certain narrative elegance.

And I was enjoying it enormously.

On the journey home from Orford, I thought about the day we'd spent together.

The castle.

The stories.

The imaginary merman.

The girls' horrified reactions.

And the peculiar pleasure of transforming an ordinary family outing into an adventure.

That was something I'd always valued.

The ability to enter another world without physically leaving this one.

To stand in a familiar landscape and imagine an entirely different history unfolding around you.

Perhaps that's what the old storytellers had done.

Perhaps the medieval chroniclers weren't simply recording events.

Perhaps they were participating in a process through which the world became more mysterious, more complex and more alive.

Not because every story was literally true.

But because stories altered the way people experienced reality.

And sometimes they encouraged people to look more closely.

To notice things.

To ask questions.

To wonder.

I thought again about Laura.

The vampire in Victorian clothing.

Standing beside a graveyard wall with her wicker basket.

She'd understood something about the power of imagination.

She hadn't merely read stories about vampires.

She'd made herself into one.

Or at least into a convincing version of what she believed a vampire ought to be.

And in doing so, she'd created an encounter that remained vivid in my memory decades later.

Perhaps the hidden people, if they existed, possessed a similar understanding.

Perhaps they knew how to inhabit our stories.
How to become the creatures we expected to encounter.
And perhaps, occasionally, they made mistakes.
A figure appeared in the wrong place.
A creature was captured.
A child wandered into a village.
A strange object crossed the sky.
And humanity added another story to its collection.
I smiled.
The hypothesis was becoming outrageous.
But there was something irresistible about it.
The possibility that the old monsters weren't monsters at all.
They were people.
Other people.
And perhaps they had been trying to tell us something for a
very long time.
End of Chapter Four

CHAPTER FIVE: THE ROAD TO HYPERBOREA

I first encountered Hyperborea when I was young.

Perhaps twelve.

Possibly earlier.

I can't now remember precisely when the name entered my imagination, but by the time I was reading Robert E. Howard and Edgar Rice Burroughs, it had acquired a particular quality.

Hyperborea.

A name that suggested something impossibly ancient.

A country beyond the familiar world.

A place that might once have existed, or might still exist somewhere inaccessible to ordinary human beings.

It wasn't simply a geographical location.

It was an atmosphere.

And I suspect I'd been preparing for it long before I encountered the name.

Because my childhood village had already taught me that the ordinary world was not necessarily the only one.

I grew up in Stewkley, a village in Buckinghamshire.

It was a good place to be a child with an interest in strange

things.

Fields.

Footpaths.

Old buildings.

A substantial medieval church.

Country lanes.

And enough quiet corners for the imagination to operate without too much interference.

The village had a curious quality for me.

Different parts seemed to possess different atmospheres.

A particular lane might feel entirely unlike another.

A stretch of woodland could become a world in itself.

An old wall, a field entrance or a group of trees might acquire a significance that had nothing to do with its practical purpose.

I wasn't consciously constructing a magical geography.

I was simply experiencing the place.

But looking back, I can see that I was developing a habit that has remained with me ever since.

I was learning to pay attention to the character of a landscape.

Not merely what it looked like.

But what it seemed to suggest.

Our primary school was associated with the church.

St Michael's stood across the road.

And the headmaster, Mr Guinn, was a lasting influence.

He had a deep knowledge of folklore and mythology, particularly the traditions of England and Britain.

And he shared it with us.

Not as a dry academic subject.

As stories.

Living material.

He would read books aloud to the class, sometimes over a period of weeks.

I remember the Narnia books.

C. S. Lewis.

Wardrobes leading into other worlds.

Talking animals.

Witches.

Ancient powers.

I also remember *The Moonstone*, by Wilkie Collins.

An altogether different sort of story, involving mystery, deception and a remarkable stolen diamond.

The important thing wasn't simply the books themselves.

It was the atmosphere Mr Guinn created.

The idea that literature, folklore, history and the landscape around us were somehow connected.

A village church wasn't merely a building.

It possessed stories.

A crossroads might have a significance beyond its use by traffic.

A particular direction of movement could be associated with ritual.

And the Devil might appear if you performed the correct procedure.

Which, naturally, interested me.

Mr Guinn taught us about going around a church nine times.
According to the tradition, if you performed the circuit correctly, the Devil might appear.
I don't recall whether he specified the exact circumstances.
Midnight, perhaps.
Or a particular night of the year.
Such details vary between local traditions.
But the central idea was memorable.
Walk around the church nine times.
And something might happen.
It was a wonderful proposition to offer a young boy.
A simple physical procedure.
An ordinary location.
And the possibility of an encounter with a supernatural being.
No expensive equipment required.
No elaborate initiation.
Just a church and a willingness to walk around it.
I don't remember attempting the experiment.
But the idea stayed with me.
And it established something important.
The ordinary landscape could contain procedures for entering another one.
There was another practice Mr Guinn introduced us to.
Widdershins.
Moving anticlockwise.
Against the apparent course of the sun.

In folklore and magical traditions, direction can possess symbolic significance.

Sunwise movement may be associated with blessing or harmony.

Widdershins movement with reversal, disruption or the undoing of ordinary conditions.

These associations vary between traditions, of course.

But as a child, I found the idea fascinating.

An action as simple as walking around something could acquire an entirely different meaning depending upon the direction.

And I put the knowledge to use.

My mother was quite comfortable with my interests. She had an interest in the oddities of the world herself, and saw some of the UFOs I saw. We often talked about such things.

There was a reassuringly ordinary side to all this. When I came home from school, she'd have afternoon tea ready. A pot of tea, a milk jug, and homemade scones. No tea bags.

When I was about six, we sometimes walked a short way up the road to visit a friend of hers, Mrs Crossthwaite. The two women would talk while I occupied myself with whatever I'd brought along, generally disappearing into my own imaginary world.

Then came the tea. Loose-leaf tea, naturally, because the leaves were important. Mrs Crossthwaite read them, and would give my mother a reading while I took very little notice.

For all I know, Mrs Crossthwaite might have revealed that Neanderthals were still living beneath England.

And there was I, oblivious.

There was a rural bus stop in Stewkley.

I would wait there with my mother, Dorothy, for the bus to

Leighton Buzzard.

The bus stop sign had been fixed to a telegraph pole.

A perfectly ordinary arrangement.

Nothing remarkable about it.

But to me the pole was more than a pole.

It was a possible axis.

A point around which the world might turn.

So I'd walk around it.

Widdershins.

Sometimes spinning around.

Letting the movement become repetitive.

And allowing my mind to drift.

I wasn't conducting a formal magical operation.

I was a child waiting for a bus.

But the effect was interesting.

The repetition.

The circular movement.

The slight alteration of bodily sensation.

The gradual detachment from whatever ordinary thoughts
had been occupying my attention.

Images would arise.

Imaginary landscapes.

Scenes.

Possibilities.

Sometimes I would become absorbed in an entirely different
world.

Then the bus would arrive.

And I'd have to return to Buckinghamshire.

Rather inconvenient, really.

Just as things were becoming interesting.

Looking back, I can see that these childhood experiments anticipated much of what I later explored through meditation, imagination and self-observation.

The methods were simple.

Repetition.

Attention.

Movement.

A willingness to suspend ordinary expectations.

And an interest in whatever emerged.

I didn't need to believe that the telegraph pole possessed supernatural powers.

The experience was sufficiently interesting without that.

But I also didn't feel obliged to reduce everything to a psychological explanation.

I was happy to leave the question open.

Perhaps something unusual was happening.

Perhaps I was simply entering a different state of consciousness.

Perhaps the distinction wasn't as straightforward as it appeared.

I was too young to formulate the problem in those terms.

But I understood the experience.

And I liked it.

Stewkley Church was another centre of this imaginative geography.

St Michael's.

A substantial building with a history extending deep into medieval England.

And, according to the landscape traditions I'd encountered, associated with one of the great lines supposedly crossing Britain.

A ley line.

The idea that ancient sites, churches and other landmarks might align across considerable distances had become popular through twentieth-century antiquarian and occult literature.

Some enthusiasts imagined lines extending across the country.

From Cornwall towards East Anglia.

Perhaps continuing out beneath the North Sea.

Into the territory that had once formed Doggerland.

The submerged landscape connecting Britain with continental Europe during prehistoric times.

There was something irresistible about the idea.

A line passing through the village church.

Continuing across England.

And disappearing beneath the sea.

Whether such alignments possess any deliberate ancient significance is another matter.

Most archaeologists regard the more elaborate ley-line claims with scepticism.

Given enough landmarks, apparent straight-line arrangements can occur without any underlying system.

But the idea was imaginatively powerful.

And for a child growing up in Stewkley, it transformed the church into something more than a religious building.

It became a point on a vast invisible network.

A place connected with distant landscapes.

Perhaps even with territories that no longer existed above the water.

Doggerland.

A drowned world.

And somewhere beyond it, perhaps, Hyperborea.

The strange thing about childhood is that we don't always recognise how unusual our experiences are until much later.

At the time, Mr Guinn's stories seemed perfectly natural.

Churches.

Devils.

Widdershins.

Ancient legends.

Narnia.

The Moonstone.

It was all part of education.

I sometimes wonder what a modern school inspector would make of it.

A Church of England primary school where the headmaster introduced children to the procedures for summoning the Devil.

One can imagine the report.

"Standards of literacy satisfactory. Folklore provision excellent. Some concerns regarding extracurricular demonic activity."

But I remain grateful.

Mr Guinn didn't merely teach us facts.
He gave us permission to imagine.
And he did so without making the imagination seem trivial.
Stories mattered.
Places mattered.
The old traditions mattered.
Even when nobody could establish precisely what they meant.
In some respects, Stewkley Primary School might as well have
been a school of witchcraft.
Long before Hogwarts.
And considerably more interesting.
There was a small area of dense woodland beside the school
playground.
I remember looking through an iron-railed fence towards it.
The trees and undergrowth formed a dark enclosure.
A place separate from the playground.
Not especially large, as I recall.
But sufficiently dense to conceal whatever might be inside.
One day I looked through the railings.
And saw something.
A creature.
It resembled a bear.
Or perhaps a werewolf.
I was convinced I'd seen it.
Not imagined it.
Seen it.

A substantial, animal-like figure among the vegetation.
I can't now reconstruct the precise details.
And I wouldn't pretend otherwise.
The memory is old.
Very old.
But the impression remains.
Something was there.
Something that didn't fit my ordinary expectations.
Of course, there may have been a perfectly mundane explanation.
A gardener.
Somebody working among the trees.
An arrangement of vegetation and shadow.
A brief glimpse of an ordinary object interpreted as something inexplicable.
Childhood perception is no more infallible than adult perception.
Perhaps less so in some circumstances.
But I remember the conviction.
A bear.
A werewolf.
Something from another world.
And the curious thing is that I don't remember being especially frightened.
I was interested.
The creature belonged to the same general territory as the stories Mr Guinn told us.

The world of folklore had apparently made an appearance beside the playground.

Well, why not?

I sometimes wonder whether Hyperborea was already present in those experiences.

Not as a geographical location.

But as an alternative layer of reality.

A world that occasionally seemed to overlap with the familiar one.

Perhaps the creature behind the school fence belonged to that world.

Perhaps the telegraph pole had served as a kind of imaginary gateway.

Perhaps the church stood upon an ancient route connecting places that ordinary maps couldn't represent.

These were not propositions I could defend scientifically.

They were imaginative associations.

But they had a certain internal consistency.

And they anticipated the ideas I would encounter later.

The hidden country.

The otherworld.

The realm beyond the ordinary.

The place from which strange beings occasionally emerged.

Hyperborea itself has a long and complicated history.

The ancient Greeks imagined a people living beyond the north wind.

Beyond Boreas.

The Hyperboreans.

Their country was distant, blessed and difficult to reach.

A place associated with Apollo and with an existence removed from many of the troubles afflicting ordinary humanity.

Different ancient writers located it in different ways.

It wasn't a precisely mapped country.

It belonged to the imaginative geography of the classical world.

A region beyond the familiar.

A place at the edge of knowledge.

And that made it available for later writers to reinvent.

Robert E. Howard incorporated Hyperborea into his prehistoric fantasy world.

A place of ancient kingdoms, sorcery and brutal civilisations.

Other writers developed their own versions.

Clark Ashton Smith, in particular, created a strange and decadent Hyperborean setting filled with sorcerers, forgotten gods and grotesque beings.

Edgar Rice Burroughs didn't need Hyperborea specifically to produce a similar effect.

His lost-world adventures offered hidden civilisations, prehistoric creatures and territories surviving beyond the reach of modern knowledge.

The Land That Time Forgot.

At the Earth's Core.

Worlds concealed within the world.

Places where the familiar laws of history appeared to have been suspended.

My father had introduced me to Burroughs.

And I read him enthusiastically.

These stories possessed a powerful attraction.

Not because I necessarily believed their geography.

But because they suggested that the Earth might contain more than the official maps admitted.

There might still be somewhere to go.

Somewhere genuinely unknown.

A place where exploration meant more than visiting a destination already photographed by millions of tourists.

The idea of a hidden world became increasingly important to me.

It appeared in different forms.

The fairy kingdoms of British folklore.

The subterranean worlds of adventure fiction.

The secret territories of occult literature.

The alternative realities of science fiction.

And eventually, the anomalous experiences I'd begun encountering myself.

I didn't regard all these things as evidence for a single hidden reality.

That would have been far too convenient.

But they formed a recurring imaginative pattern.

The world we know may not be the whole world.

And the boundaries of the familiar may not be as secure as we imagine.

UFOs were part of my childhood too.

I saw them often enough to regard the subject as something more than an abstract curiosity.

One particular sighting remains vivid.

I was twelve.

Attending secondary school at Wing, a village not far from Stewkley.

We travelled by school coach through the Buckinghamshire countryside.

On one journey home, I looked out of the window.

And saw two bright orange objects in the sky.

Cigar-shaped.

Flying in perfect parallel.

They maintained their formation.

Then suddenly accelerated away at extraordinary speed.

Still parallel.

And disappeared.

I watched the whole thing.

There was no dramatic aftermath.

No military investigation.

No official report that I'm aware of.

I simply saw something I couldn't identify.

Two orange objects.

Moving together.

Then departing at a speed that appeared astonishing.

I don't know what they were.

Nor can I establish their actual distance, size or velocity from a brief visual observation.

But the experience stayed with me.

There were other sightings.

Silver orbs.

Objects that appeared to move in unusual ways.

Sometimes seeming to jump from one position to another.

Movements that didn't resemble the aircraft I was familiar with.

Again, I couldn't determine precisely what I was seeing.

An unfamiliar object can create misleading impressions of movement, particularly when there are few visual reference points.

But the experiences were interesting.

And they fitted into a broader pattern of curiosity.

I was reading about UFOs.

Reading about ancient astronauts.

Reading about hidden worlds.

And occasionally seeing things in the sky that I couldn't explain.

The result was hardly surprising.

I began to suspect that reality was more complicated than the adults generally admitted.

Although, to be fair, many adults probably suspected the same thing.

They simply had mortgages and jobs to worry about.

When I first read Vallée, the relationship between UFOs and folklore became particularly compelling.

He suggested that the modern phenomenon might be connected with much older traditions of encounters with strange beings.

Fairies.

Elves.

Little people.

Mysterious visitors.

The similarities weren't necessarily proof of a common origin.

But they were intriguing.

And they offered a way of thinking about UFOs that didn't depend entirely upon spacecraft arriving from distant planets.

Perhaps the phenomenon was closer to home.

Perhaps it had been interacting with humanity for centuries.

Perhaps its appearances changed according to the expectations of the witnesses.

And perhaps, in some cases, it was connected with the hidden worlds described in folklore.

I began to think of Hyperborea in those terms.

Not simply a lost northern country.

But a concealed territory.

A world existing alongside ours.

Perhaps beneath it.

Perhaps accessible only under unusual circumstances.

A place that could occasionally intrude upon ordinary reality.

The more I thought about it, the more the Neanderthals seemed to offer an interesting possibility.

Here was a population that had genuinely existed.

Not mythological beings.

Not imaginary creatures.

Real people.

Closely related to us.

They had inhabited Europe for hundreds of thousands of

years.

And they had been present in the landscape of East Anglia.

At Lynford, the archaeological evidence placed them in the company of mammoths during the last Ice Age.

Then, according to the established account, they disappeared as a distinct population.

Their genetic legacy survived through interbreeding with *Homo sapiens*.

But the Neanderthals themselves ceased to exist.

Or so the evidence indicates.

But what if a small population had survived?

What if they'd withdrawn into regions inaccessible to our ancestors?

What if they'd developed a culture entirely different from ours?

And what if their descendants still existed?

The idea was unsupported by evidence.

I knew that.

But as a speculative proposition, it had considerable appeal.

It offered a way of bringing together the ancient and modern mysteries without introducing extraterrestrial visitors.

The woodwoses.

The Green Children.

The man from the sea.

The strange creatures in the forests.

The UFOs.

Perhaps they were all different expressions of a single hidden population.

Not necessarily in reality.

But within the model I was constructing.

And that model was beginning to acquire a name.

Hyperborea.

There was something else.

The ancient Greek Hyperborea was associated with a blessed existence beyond the troubles of ordinary humanity.

A place outside the familiar world of conflict and suffering.

What if our hidden Neanderthals had developed something resembling that ideal?

Not a utopia in the simplistic sense.

No society is likely to be entirely free from conflict.

But perhaps a civilisation that had learned to maintain itself without endless expansion.

Without the perpetual accumulation of wealth.

Without the competitive systems that dominate modern human society.

A culture that had survived for tens of thousands of years might possess a deep understanding of ecological balance.

It would have to.

A concealed population couldn't afford the luxury of destroying its own environment.

Perhaps it had developed technologies that were almost invisible.

Methods of obtaining energy, managing resources and communicating that left little trace.

Perhaps its inhabitants had learned to work with natural systems rather than continually attempting to overpower them.

And perhaps their understanding of consciousness had

developed along lines entirely different from ours.

This was becoming increasingly speculative.

But it was a useful exercise.

Because it forced me to imagine intelligence without automatically reproducing modern human civilisation.

An advanced society need not resemble London, New York or Tokyo.

It need not possess skyscrapers.

Stock exchanges.

Advertising agencies.

Or a publishing industry.

Perhaps it could be advanced in ways we barely recognised.

I imagined the Neanderthals watching us.

Observing the development of Homo sapiens.

Our cities.

Our wars.

Our religions.

Our scientific discoveries.

Our creativity.

And our capacity for destruction.

Perhaps they regarded us with a mixture of fascination and alarm.

Perhaps they'd concluded that we were intelligent but dangerously unstable.

A species capable of composing symphonies and manufacturing nuclear weapons.

Often within the same generation.

A peculiar achievement.

And perhaps they'd occasionally intervened.

Not openly.

Not through governments or institutions.

But through carefully managed encounters.

A strange creature appearing in a forest.

An unusual visitor emerging from the sea.

A mysterious child entering a village.

Aerial objects displaying capabilities beyond our technology.

Perhaps these were not random events.

Perhaps they were demonstrations.

Signals.

Attempts to introduce an unfamiliar possibility into human consciousness.

The possibility that we weren't the only people on Earth.

Of course, there were enormous problems with the hypothesis.

Where was the physical evidence?

Where were the settlements?

The tools?

The remains?

The traces of industry?

How could a population survive in concealment for tens of thousands of years?

How could it develop advanced technology without leaving detectable evidence?

And why would its members occasionally appear in such bizarre circumstances?

These were not minor objections.

They were fundamental.

A serious scientific investigation would require evidence capable of addressing them.

And I had none.

But I wasn't conducting a scientific investigation.

I was constructing a speculative narrative.

A model.

A way of exploring the relationship between folklore, anomalous experiences and the possibility of other forms of human intelligence.

And within that framework, Hyperborea was becoming increasingly useful.

It was a name for the unknown.

A place where the imagination could operate without pretending that every possibility was established fact.

I thought again about Stewkley.

The church.

The school.

Mr Guinn.

The telegraph pole.

The little woodland beyond the playground fence.

The creature I'd seen there.

The orange objects above Buckinghamshire.

Perhaps none of these experiences had any connection with one another.

Perhaps the apparent patterns existed only because I was looking for them.

Human beings are remarkably good at finding patterns.

Sometimes too good.

But patterns are also how we begin to understand the world.

The challenge is knowing when a pattern reflects something external.

And when it is merely an arrangement created by the mind.

I didn't think I'd solved that problem.

Nor did I expect to.

But I was becoming increasingly interested in the possibility that the imagination could be used as an investigative instrument.

Not a source of reliable facts.

But a way of generating hypotheses.

A means of exploring possibilities.

A method of discovering questions that might otherwise never occur to us.

And sometimes, perhaps, a way of noticing things we'd previously overlooked.

There was one final possibility that amused me.

What if the Neanderthals were aware of my interest?

What if some hidden population had occasionally allowed me to glimpse something unusual?

The creature beside the school playground.

The orange objects over Buckinghamshire.

The strange calls near Croxton.

The elongated-faced creature in the Norfolk countryside.

The red flotillas.

Perhaps these were all little demonstrations.
Not enough to establish anything.
Just enough to keep me interested.
A kind of educational programme.
I imagined an elderly Neanderthal observing my progress.
“He’s still thinking about us.”
“Has he worked it out?”
“Not remotely.”
“Should we give him another clue?”
“Perhaps.”
“What sort?”
“Something ridiculous.”
“Why?”
“Because he’ll spend years trying to understand it.”
I could almost hear the laughter.
Perhaps the hidden people possessed an excellent sense of humour.
After tens of thousands of years observing Homo sapiens, they’d certainly have plenty of material.
And perhaps one of them occasionally shook his head and remarked:
“Don’t think too hard, my boy. It won’t get you far.”
I returned in my imagination to the bus stop at Stewkley.
A boy waiting for the bus to Leighton Buzzard.
Walking widdershins around a telegraph pole.
The village quiet around him.

The church across the road.

The fields stretching away towards the horizon.

And somewhere beyond the ordinary landscape, an imaginary country.

Hyperborea.

A place that might be ancient.

Might be hidden.

Might exist only in the mind.

Or might, within the story I was beginning to tell, possess a reality of its own.

The bus would arrive.

I'd stop circling the pole.

Climb aboard.

And travel through the Buckinghamshire countryside.

But the other world would remain.

Waiting.

Not necessarily somewhere far away.

Perhaps beneath the fields.

Perhaps beyond the familiar boundaries of perception.

Perhaps neither here nor there.

And perhaps, occasionally, one of its inhabitants would look up at the surface world and wonder what the strange people above were doing.

I imagined him watching the schoolboy at the bus stop.

Circling a telegraph pole.

Widdershins.

Again and again.

And shaking his head.

“Curious creatures, these Homo sapiens.”

Then he’d return to Hyperborea.

Leaving me to catch the bus.

End of Chapter Five

CHAPTER SIX: THE PEOPLE WHO WENT UNDERGROUND

The Neanderthals didn't entirely disappear.

That much we know.

Their genetic inheritance survives in many people living today.

Ancient encounters between Neanderthals and Homo sapiens weren't always violent. Sometimes they involved sex, relationships and, presumably, children.

We cannot reconstruct the circumstances of those individual encounters.

Perhaps some were affectionate.

Perhaps some were opportunistic.

Perhaps some were coercive.

The genetic evidence doesn't tell us.

But it establishes something important.

Two distinct human populations met.

And they were sufficiently compatible to produce descendants whose genetic inheritance survives tens of thousands of years later.

Which raises an interesting question.

What happened to the families?

Not the genes.

The actual people.

The Neanderthal woman living with a Homo sapiens man.

Or the Homo sapiens woman living among Neanderthals.

The children growing up between two populations.

What did they think of themselves?

Did they belong to one group?

Both?

Neither?

Did their relatives regard them as ordinary members of the community?

Or did they occupy an awkward position between two kinds of humanity?

We don't know.

But I suspect their lives were considerably more complicated than the phrase interbreeding between archaic human populations might suggest.

There's another term that occasionally causes confusion.

Cro-Magnon.

People sometimes imagine Cro-Magnons as a separate stage between Neanderthals and modern humans.

They weren't.

The name originally referred to early modern human remains discovered in France.

Cro-Magnons were Homo sapiens.

Our own species.

Anatomically modern people living in prehistoric Europe.

They weren't the ancestors of Homo sapiens in the sense of being a different precursor species.

They were already us.

Which makes the story considerably more interesting.

Because the encounter wasn't between a primitive species and its inevitable evolutionary successor.

It was between two human lineages.

Both capable of surviving difficult environments.

Both possessing knowledge, skills and social relationships.

Both adapted to their circumstances.

And one of them eventually ceased to exist as a distinct population.

The precise reasons remain debated.

Climate.

Population size.

Competition.

Demographic disadvantage.

Interbreeding.

Possibly several interacting factors.

There is no established evidence for a single genocidal campaign by Homo sapiens against Neanderthals.

But for the purposes of my increasingly outrageous hypothesis, I began imagining the encounter from the Neanderthal point of view.

And that changed the story.

Suppose you were a Neanderthal.
You'd grown up among your own people.
You knew the landscape.
The animals.
The seasons.
The places where food could be found.
The places to avoid.
You understood the customs of your group.
And you possessed a body and mind well suited to the world
you inhabited.
Then another population began appearing.
They looked rather like you.
But not quite.
They had different faces.
Different bodies.
Perhaps different voices.
Their tools and methods sometimes resembled yours.
Sometimes they were unfamiliar.
They travelled.
Formed alliances.
Exchanged information.
And appeared to be remarkably adaptable.
At first, perhaps, there was no particular problem.
The two populations occupied overlapping territories.
Sometimes they encountered one another.
Sometimes they avoided each other.

Sometimes they exchanged partners.

Children were born.

Life continued.

But gradually something became apparent.

The newcomers were increasing.

They occupied more territory.

Their networks extended farther.

And they possessed a formidable capacity for changing their environment.

Not necessarily through superior intelligence in every respect.

Nor through constant warfare.

But through a combination of numbers, mobility, cooperation, innovation and an almost inexhaustible determination to expand.

What would you do?

I began imagining a gathering of Neanderthal elders.

Not necessarily old in years.

Experienced members of different groups.

People who had observed the newcomers over several generations.

They were concerned.

Not because Homo sapiens were monsters.

Most weren't.

Some were friendly.

Some became relatives.

Some were useful trading partners.

But there was something about them.

An instability.

A tendency to become consumed by ideas.

Grievances.

Ambitions.

Stories about enemies.

Stories about territory.

Stories about what belonged to whom.

Once a particular idea took hold, the newcomers could pursue it with relentless determination.

Sometimes that determination produced wonderful things.

New tools.

New techniques.

Unexpected solutions.

But sometimes it produced violence.

And not merely violence arising from immediate danger.

Violence driven by beliefs.

By imagined insults.

By disputes that might have been resolved through conversation.

By the conviction that another group was fundamentally wrong, dangerous or inferior.

Of course, we cannot know whether prehistoric *Homo sapiens* behaved in precisely this fashion.

I'm projecting characteristics visible in later human history into an imagined prehistoric setting.

But as a fictional premise, it was compelling.

Perhaps the Neanderthals noticed something that *Homo sapi-*

ens themselves barely understood.

A ghost in the machine.

A peculiar combination of intelligence, imagination and aggression.

A mind capable of constructing elaborate possibilities.

And then becoming dangerously attached to them.

The Neanderthal elders considered the problem.

Perhaps they could fight.

But fighting would solve little.

Even if they won a particular conflict, more newcomers would eventually arrive.

Perhaps they could negotiate.

And perhaps they did.

But agreements depended upon the willingness of both populations to maintain them.

And the newcomers seemed remarkably good at inventing reasons why agreements no longer applied.

Eventually somebody suggested another possibility.

Leave.

Not the world.

Not entirely.

But the territories increasingly occupied by Homo sapiens.

Withdraw.

Find places where the newcomers were unlikely to follow.

Mountains.

Caverns.

Underground waterways.

Complex systems of tunnels and chambers.

Places beneath the surface.

The proposal must have seemed unthinkable.

Perhaps even ridiculous.

But the alternative was to remain exposed to a population whose numbers and ambitions appeared likely to overwhelm them.

So a few groups began exploring.

They found caves.

Natural passages.

Sheltered places.

And perhaps, in my fictional version of events, they discovered something unexpected.

An underworld.

Not the molten interior of the planet.

Not an enormous hollow sphere.

But a network of inhabitable regions concealed beneath the surface.

A landscape within the landscape.

And gradually, the people began to disappear.

It wouldn't have happened overnight.

There would have been arguments.

Some Neanderthals would have refused to leave.

Others would have remained among Homo sapiens.

Some families would have divided.

Children might have been raised in different communities.

And the migration itself would have been difficult enough.

A subterranean existence presents formidable problems.

Light.

Food.

Water.

Ventilation.

Waste.

Disease.

The maintenance of healthy populations.

A civilisation cannot survive merely by finding a large cave and deciding to live in it.

The practical difficulties would have been immense.

But perhaps the first underground settlements weren't entirely underground.

Perhaps they were concealed valleys.

Cave entrances.

Sheltered regions connected to the surface.

Places where the people could obtain resources while remaining largely unseen.

And over thousands of years, their knowledge developed.

Their settlements became more sophisticated.

Their methods of concealment improved.

And eventually the surface world became something they visited rather than inhabited.

This was the beginning of my imaginary Hyperborea.

Not a lost empire of golden towers.

Not a kingdom of supernatural beings.

A refuge.

A civilisation founded upon the decision to avoid the more destructive tendencies of Homo sapiens.

The newcomers, meanwhile, had their own ideas about the underground.

Caves were dangerous.

Dark.

Unfamiliar.

Sometimes inhabited by animals.

Sometimes associated with the dead.

As human cultures developed, underground places acquired a rich collection of supernatural meanings.

Entrances to other worlds.

Homes of spirits.

Dwellings of the dead.

Places inhabited by fairies, goblins, demons and strange creatures.

The underworld became an important feature of mythology.

And this suited my hypothetical Neanderthals perfectly.

They wouldn't need to invent every story.

Homo sapiens would do much of the work for them.

A traveller hears a strange noise emerging from a cave.

He tells his companions.

Somebody claims to have seen a figure.

The story grows.

Eventually the place acquires a reputation.

Nobody goes there.

Excellent.

The Neanderthals have achieved their objective without lifting a finger.

And if somebody becomes particularly inquisitive?

Well, perhaps a little theatrical assistance might help.

I thought about Scooby-Doo.

An unlikely source of inspiration for a theory about prehistoric human survival.

But there you go.

In the cartoons, the apparent supernatural menace generally turns out to be somebody using tricks to frighten people away.

A ghost.

A monster.

A mysterious apparition.

All designed to protect some entirely mundane interest.

Perhaps the Neanderthals had discovered the same principle.

If Homo sapiens were inclined to believe that underground places contained terrifying beings, why not encourage the belief?

A strange sound.

An unusual light.

A fleeting apparition.

Something moving where nothing ought to move.

Before long, the local population would decide that the place was haunted.

And leave it alone.

The Neanderthals could return to their ordinary activities.

“Another group of humans at the entrance.”

“Did you frighten them?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Made a horrible noise.”

“Did it work?”

“Immediately.”

“Excellent. Put the kettle on.”

I liked the idea.

An entire tradition of supernatural folklore arising, in part, from a concealed population attempting to maintain its privacy.

It was absurd.

But it had a pleasing simplicity.

There was another development.

The Neanderthals began studying Homo sapiens.

Not merely their weapons or tools.

Their behaviour.

Their psychology.

Their beliefs.

Their fears.

They discovered that humans could be influenced through stories.

Symbols.

Expectations.

Rituals.

A person who believed a place was dangerous might experience fear before anything happened.

A person expecting a ghost might interpret an ordinary sound as evidence of a supernatural presence.

The mind was remarkably suggestible.

And perhaps the Neanderthals became experts in suggestion.

Not because they possessed magical powers.

But because they had spent thousands of years observing another human population.

They understood our habits.

Our weaknesses.

Our ability to frighten ourselves.

And perhaps they developed methods of influencing perception that went far beyond anything we currently understand.

That was where the hypothesis began moving away from ordinary archaeology.

And towards something more speculative.

A civilisation whose primary technology wasn't based upon industrial machinery.

But upon information.

Consciousness.

Perception.

The relationship between observer and environment.

I wondered whether such a civilisation would develop the same technologies as ours.

Perhaps not.

Human technology has followed a particular historical trajectory.

Fire.

Agriculture.

Metallurgy.

Machines.

Industrial production.

Electricity.

Electronics.

Computing.

Artificial intelligence.

But there is no reason to assume that every intelligent civilisation would follow precisely the same path.

Different environments create different problems.

Different cultures establish different priorities.

A subterranean population concerned primarily with concealment, sustainability and long-term survival might develop technologies that were almost invisible to us.

Methods of communication.

Energy management.

Environmental control.

Perhaps biological technologies.

Perhaps techniques involving fields and electromagnetic phenomena.

Perhaps forms of computation integrated into living systems.

Or perhaps something so unfamiliar that we wouldn't immediately recognise it as technology.

I thought about the old idea of the ether.

A medium supposedly permeating space.

An idea that had played an important role in nineteenth-century physics before being displaced by modern theories.

Nikola Tesla had used terminology associated with the ether and developed remarkable electrical technologies.

Could our imaginary Neanderthals have influenced him?

Perhaps supplied information?

Perhaps encouraged him towards discoveries that might place humanity upon a less destructive path?

It was a delightful fictional possibility.

But I wouldn't confuse it with history.

There is no credible evidence that Tesla received technical information from hidden prehistoric humans.

His documented achievements belong to his own work and the scientific and engineering culture of his time.

Nevertheless, within my story, I imagined the Hyperboreans watching him with interest.

Here was a Homo sapiens who seemed unusually capable of thinking beyond established conventions.

Perhaps he might help his species develop differently.

Perhaps he might encourage technologies that reduced the need for destructive competition.

And perhaps, as his later circumstances became increasingly difficult, the hidden people watched with disappointment.

Another promising human.

Another complicated human life.

Another reminder that intelligence and social success are not necessarily the same thing.

The idea of people living beneath the Earth had, of course, appeared in literature long before I began constructing my Neanderthal hypothesis.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* was an obvious example.

Published in 1871, it described a subterranean civilisation possessing a mysterious force called Vril.

The inhabitants had developed technologies and social arrangements far beyond those of ordinary humanity.

And they regarded surface-dwelling humans with a certain degree of contempt.

An understandable attitude, perhaps.

Bulwer-Lytton's story was fiction.

But it became entangled with later occult speculation.

The idea of Vril acquired a life of its own.

And eventually became associated, often misleadingly, with stories about Nazi occultism.

There was a whole mythology surrounding supposed Nazi investigations into hidden worlds, secret energies and entrances to the hollow Earth.

Some of it was based upon genuine historical interests in esoteric ideas.

Much of it was postwar invention, exaggeration or outright fantasy.

The Nazis did sponsor expeditions, including the notorious Ahnenerbe's research activities, but the popular image of Hitler dispatching teams of scientists around the world to locate a literal entrance to an underground civilisation is not supported as a straightforward historical fact.

Still, the imagery was arresting.

Uniformed men carrying surveying equipment into remote mountains.

Searching for an entrance to a hidden world.

Perhaps imagining that they might discover ancient powers capable of securing their domination of Europe.

And, within my fictional Hyperborean model, the Neanderthals would have been horrified.

Here was Homo sapiens at its most dangerous.

A regime obsessed with racial hierarchy, conquest and extermination.

The very tendencies that might have persuaded the Neanderthals to withdraw in the first place.

I imagined the hidden people receiving reports of Nazi interest in subterranean realms.

“Who are these people?”

“Germans.”

“What do they want?”

“To establish a thousand-year empire.”

“How long have they been in existence?”

“Not very long.”

“And they think a thousand years is impressive?”

“Apparently.”

“Keep the entrances closed.”

Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* offered another version of the hidden-country theme.

A remote plateau in South America where prehistoric creatures had survived into the modern age.

The appeal was obvious.

A place separated from ordinary history.

An environment in which ancient forms of life continued beyond their supposed extinction.

Edgar Rice Burroughs explored similar possibilities.

And Robert E. Howard filled imaginary prehistoric landscapes

with forgotten peoples, ancient kingdoms and monstrous survivals.

These writers understood something important about the human imagination.

We are fascinated by the possibility that the past might not be entirely past.

That somewhere, beyond the reach of ordinary knowledge, ancient things might continue.

A lost species.

A forgotten civilisation.

A surviving population from an earlier age.

The idea is almost irresistible.

And it doesn't require belief.

You can enjoy the possibility without expecting to find a dinosaur behind the next hill.

Although it would certainly make the walk more interesting.

In Suffolk, the landscape itself seemed to encourage such thoughts.

Ancient mounds.

Tumuli.

Earthworks.

Places that had survived for thousands of years.

Some clearly associated with burial.

Others less straightforward.

The Breckland landscape is scattered with archaeological traces.

Many are easy to overlook.

A slight rise in a field.

An unusual shape beneath the grass.

A mound among trees.

Something that appears natural until you examine an old map.

Or walk around it.

Or notice that its shape doesn't quite fit the surrounding terrain.

I had become increasingly interested in these features.

Particularly those around the military training areas near Croxton.

There were tumuli scattered across the district.

Frog Hill.

The land around Snake Wood.

And numerous other locations.

Some were marked on Ordnance Survey maps.

Others required a little investigation.

The mounds were real.

Their archaeological interpretations varied.

But within my imaginary Hyperborean model, they acquired another possible significance.

What if some were entrances?

Not necessarily the original prehistoric structures themselves.

But places associated with underground routes.

Points where the surface world and the hidden world had once been connected.

Perhaps the ancient people who built the mounds had known something.

Perhaps they'd encountered the hidden population.

Perhaps the mounds marked places that were already considered unusual.

Or perhaps I was simply projecting an elaborate story onto ordinary archaeological remains.

That was entirely possible.

But I found the exercise enjoyable.

In July 2026, I parked beside the military land near Snake Wood.

There was already another car there.

Not unusual.

Occasionally people stop in these remote places.

Walkers.

Birdwatchers.

People checking their tyres.

People making telephone calls.

Or simply somebody looking for a quiet place to sit.

I wondered who owned the car.

Perhaps a member of the Ramblers.

An organisation devoted to walking through the countryside while carefully following the prescribed routes and generally ignoring the more interesting possibilities lurking just beyond them.

An unfair characterisation, perhaps.

But it amused me.

I was preparing to explore a couple of nearby tumuli.

And just as I was getting ready, the owner of the other car appeared.

He was walking back along a country track.

An older man.

Long grey hair.

A beard.

He looked like somebody who might know a thing or two about the local landscape.

I said hello.

He returned the greeting.

And almost immediately I mentioned that I was going to look at the twin tumuli nearby.

That did it.

He was an antiquarian.

An enthusiast.

Somebody who knew the district and its ancient remains.

He used Ordnance Survey maps.

Including historical editions available online through a Scottish mapping website.

Almost certainly the National Library of Scotland's excellent map collection.

We began talking.

And discovered that we shared a considerable number of interests.

He knew about the mounds.

Their locations.

Their possible functions.

The difficulties of interpreting them.

He was cautious about extravagant claims.

Quite reasonably.

A mound might simply be a burial site.
Or a natural feature.
Or something whose original purpose had been lost.
But he was also familiar with the speculative literature.
And clearly enjoyed it.
He wasn't a man who needed every question settled before finding it interesting.
Which suited me perfectly.
We talked about the landscape.
The tumuli.
The old maps.
The possibility that some ancient sites possessed meanings beyond those currently understood.
He told me about mounds I hadn't known existed.
And I found myself making mental notes.
Here was somebody who'd spent years exploring the same district.
But from a slightly different angle.
Our knowledge overlapped.
And where it didn't, we could exchange information.
It was a very pleasant encounter.
He was unmistakably English.
An East Anglian.
Somebody who seemed thoroughly rooted in the region.
But he also had American relatives.
And at some point he mentioned that one of his cousins worked for the CIA.

I smiled.

Naturally.

A meeting beside remote military land.

Two men discussing ancient mounds and strange possibilities.

And one of them casually reveals a family connection with American intelligence.

You couldn't make it up.

Well, you could.

But people would accuse you of overdoing the plot.

I suspect he enjoyed telling me.

And why not?

It's the sort of detail that gives an ordinary conversation a little additional flavour.

We continued talking.

And I found myself thinking how unusual the encounter would appear to somebody passing by.

Two men standing beside parked cars in the Suffolk countryside.

Discussing ancient burial mounds.

Historical maps.

Possible hidden meanings.

And the occasional speculative theory.

To us, it was entirely normal.

To somebody else, it might have seemed eccentric.

But that was the interesting thing.

We recognised something in one another.

A shared way of approaching the landscape.

A willingness to look beyond the obvious.
Not necessarily believing every possibility.
But enjoying the investigation.
And enjoying the possibility that the world might contain more
than it appeared to.
Eventually he had to leave.
Dinner was waiting.
A perfectly respectable reason to conclude an antiquarian discussion.
We said goodbye.
And he headed home.
I remained beside the military land.
Preparing to continue my exploration.
And I thought about the encounter.
Two people arriving independently at a remote location.
One returning from a walk.
The other preparing to investigate nearby tumuli.
And discovering an immediate connection.
Coincidence, of course.
At least, that was the simplest explanation.
People with similar interests often visit similar places.
If you spend enough time around ancient sites, you're bound
to encounter other enthusiasts.
But the timing was rather good.
And I couldn't resist wondering whether something had arranged it.
Not necessarily a supernatural agency.

Perhaps simply the curious way that interests, habits and circumstances occasionally converge.

But within my Hyperborean story, I imagined the hidden people observing us.

Two surface humans.

Standing beside their cars.

Discussing ancient mounds.

And apparently enjoying themselves enormously.

“Here we go again.”

“What now?”

“Two of them.”

“Doing what?”

“Talking about the entrances.”

“Do they know?”

“Not remotely.”

“Good.”

“One of them has a cousin in the CIA.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.”

The meeting reminded me of a book I’d loved for years.

Henry Gilbert’s Robin Hood and the Men of the Greenwood.

Of all the retellings of the Robin Hood stories I’d encountered, Gilbert’s possessed a particularly powerful atmosphere.

The forest wasn’t merely a collection of trees.

It was a world.

A place with its own laws.

Its own inhabitants.

Its own mysterious history.

And among those inhabitants were the Mound People.

An ancient population associated with the hidden places of the landscape.

In Gilbert's imaginative world, Robin Hood could deal with these beings.

He had their respect.

And occasionally their assistance.

I loved that.

Robin Hood wasn't simply an outlaw fighting corrupt authority.

He was a figure who belonged to the Greenwood.

A man who understood the forest and its inhabitants.

Including those who existed beyond ordinary human society.

The Mound People seemed to belong to a deeper layer of England.

Older than the kings.

Older than the sheriffs.

Older than the institutions that claimed authority over the land.

They were part of the country itself.

And Robin Hood, by living outside conventional society, had somehow earned their recognition.

I imagined the Neanderthals appreciating Robin Hood.

A man who resisted oppressive authority.

Who took from the wealthy and helped the poor.

Who rejected the assumption that power automatically conferred moral legitimacy.

Such a figure might appeal to a population that had withdrawn from the surface world precisely to avoid domination.

Perhaps the hidden people had their own stories about Robin.

Perhaps they'd watched his adventures.

Perhaps they'd helped him.

Not openly.

But through small interventions.

A warning.

A hidden path.

A sudden disappearance.

A piece of information arriving at precisely the right moment.

Within the fictional model, it was entirely possible.

And the Mound People offered an elegant bridge between the medieval imagination and the idea of a surviving prehistoric population.

Not because Henry Gilbert had secretly documented Neanderthals.

He hadn't.

He was writing fiction.

But because fiction sometimes preserves imaginative possibilities that conventional history has no reason to consider.

The idea of another people inhabiting the landscape.

Older.

Hidden.

Operating according to different rules.

And occasionally interacting with those surface humans who possess the right temperament.

I thought about the strange geography around Croxton.

The military training land.

The mounds.

The old tracks.

The wooded areas.

Frog Hill.

Snake Wood.

The places where I'd experienced unusual events.

There were also ancient earthworks within and around the broader military landscape near RAF Mildenhall.

Some appeared on Ordnance Survey mapping.

Others were recorded in archaeological inventories.

I hadn't systematically checked every feature.

And I wouldn't claim that all the marked mounds were necessarily prehistoric burial sites.

But the general pattern was intriguing.

Ancient earthworks.

Military installations.

Restricted land.

And occasional reports of unusual phenomena.

The temptation to connect them was obvious.

Perhaps too obvious.

Military areas can produce unfamiliar sounds and lights.

Restricted land also preserves archaeological features from modern disturbance.

And people interested in anomalous phenomena may be particularly attentive to anything unusual around airbases.

There were perfectly ordinary reasons why these things might occur in the same district.

But within the Hyperborean model, the conjunction acquired another interpretation.

What if the ancient mounds marked places where the hidden people had once maintained contact with the surface?

What if some of those routes still existed?

And what if the strange objects occasionally seen around the district were connected with the people below?

Not extraterrestrial spacecraft.

Vehicles belonging to another branch of humanity.

A population that had been developing independently for tens of thousands of years.

I remembered the cries at Wyrley's Drove.

The dark-red objects.

The elongated-faced creature.

The brightly illuminated craft that had interrupted my attempt to record a video near Frog Hill.

There was no evidence that any of these experiences had anything to do with the tumuli.

Nor with Neanderthals.

Nor with a hidden civilisation.

But I could see how the story might develop.

A region containing ancient earthworks.

A long history of human occupation.

A modern military presence.

And a collection of anomalous experiences.

All occurring within a relatively small geographical area.

Perhaps the hidden people had chosen the district for reasons connected with its geology.

Perhaps the mounds marked old routes.

Perhaps the military installations had been built without any knowledge of what lay beneath them.

Or perhaps, within the more extravagant version of the story, somebody in authority knew perfectly well.

That was where the narrative began approaching the territory of conspiracy fiction.

And I was cautious about that.

Conspiracies can become convenient explanations for anything.

No evidence?

It's been concealed.

No witnesses?

They've been silenced.

No physical traces?

They've been removed.

A hypothesis that explains every possible absence of evidence is difficult to distinguish from a story that cannot be tested.

So I preferred to keep the question open.

The mounds were real.

My experiences were real as experiences.

The connection between them remained imaginary.

But it was a useful imaginary connection.

Because it encouraged me to look at the landscape differently.

I wondered whether the hidden people might have developed a particular attitude towards *Homo sapiens*.

Not hatred.
Not contempt.
Perhaps something closer to weary affection.
They'd watched us for thousands of years.
Seen our achievements.
Our failures.
Our wars.
Our art.
Our inventiveness.
And our tendency to create problems for ourselves.
Perhaps they regarded us as troublesome relatives.
A younger branch of the family.
Brilliant.
Energetic.
Unpredictable.
And occasionally dangerous.
Perhaps they intervened from time to time.
Not to control us.
But to prevent us from destroying ourselves.
Or destroying the environment upon which both populations depended.
And perhaps they were beginning to consider a more substantial return.
A gradual emergence.
A reintroduction.
Not as conquerors.

But as neighbours.

The problem would be preparing Homo sapiens for the encounter.

How do you tell a species that believes itself to be the only surviving form of humanity that another population has been living beneath its feet for tens of thousands of years?

How do you explain that some of its oldest legends may have originated in encounters with those people?

How do you prevent panic?

Or exploitation?

Or the inevitable attempts to capture, classify and control?

Perhaps the answer was to proceed slowly.

Very slowly.

Over centuries.

Even millennia.

Allowing occasional encounters.

Introducing unfamiliar possibilities.

Encouraging the development of stories.

Fairies.

Wild men.

Strange visitors.

UFOs.

Not necessarily because every story was true.

But because the stories prepared the imagination.

And the imagination, eventually, might prepare the culture.

I thought again about the antiquarian beside Snake Wood.

The long grey hair.

The beard.

The old maps.

The CIA cousin.

The pleasure of discovering another person interested in the same obscure subjects.

Perhaps that was what the hidden people were looking for.

Not governments.

Not military organisations.

Not institutions.

Individuals.

People willing to consider unfamiliar possibilities without immediately attempting to possess or destroy them.

People who could encounter something strange and remain curious.

People who could entertain a hypothesis without becoming enslaved by it.

Perhaps the Neanderthals had been quietly identifying such people for generations.

Watching.

Waiting.

Occasionally arranging an encounter.

Or perhaps the entire idea was a product of my imagination.

That was considerably more likely.

But it made for a good story.

And sometimes a good story is a useful instrument for exploring questions that ordinary discourse leaves untouched.

The sun was beginning to lower over the Suffolk countryside.

I stood near the military land, thinking about the mounds.

Ancient earthworks.

Silent witnesses to human activities that had taken place long before our present civilisation existed.

Whatever their original purpose, they'd survived.

Kingdoms had risen and fallen.

Religions had changed.

Wars had been fought.

The landscape had been altered.

And the mounds remained.

Perhaps not entirely unchanged.

But still recognisable.

Still present.

Still capable of drawing the attention of somebody willing to stop beside a country lane and investigate.

I imagined the Neanderthals beneath them.

Not necessarily directly beneath any particular mound.

But somewhere in the hidden geography of my story.

A civilisation older than our own.

A people who had chosen withdrawal over conquest.

Who had survived by becoming invisible.

And who now watched the surface world with increasing concern.

Perhaps they'd begun to wonder whether the time for concealment was coming to an end.

Perhaps the strange appearances were becoming more frequent.

Perhaps the objects in the sky were no longer intended merely to confuse.

Perhaps they were announcements.

Small demonstrations.

Hints.

A gradual preparation for something larger.

The people who went underground might eventually return.

And when they did, the greatest shock might not be that another intelligent population existed.

It might be that they'd been here all along.

Watching us.

Waiting.

And occasionally laughing at our behaviour.

I smiled.

Then I got back into the car.

There was still daylight.

And somewhere nearby, another ancient mound waiting to be examined.

End of Chapter Six

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE UFOS WERE NEVER EXTRATERRESTRIAL

“Have you ever met an alien?”

“No.”

“Had a close encounter with one?”

“Don’t be silly.”

“Why?”

“Well, even with all this American Disclosure business, it’s mostly nutters, isn’t it? I mean, there are billions of stars and planets out there. Probably plenty of life. But why would they come here?”

“Perhaps they like the scenery.”

“And if they wanted the planet’s resources, they’d simply arrive, zap us all out of existence and take whatever they needed.”

“Fair point.”

“Exactly.”

“But there’s something you’re overlooking.”

“What’s that?”

“The word alien doesn’t necessarily mean extraterrestrial.”

“What else would it mean?”

“Well, the Americans have long used the word for people who aren’t citizens of the United States.”

“That’s different.”

“Is it?”

“Of course it is.”

“An alien is somebody who doesn’t belong. Somebody from somewhere else. Somebody who isn’t one of us.”

“Yes.”

“So how do you know there aren’t aliens living among us already?”

The extraterrestrial hypothesis has dominated UFO discussions for decades.

Flying saucers.

Little grey men.

Abductions.

Government cover-ups.

Secret military installations.

And, more recently, congressional hearings in the United States.

The idea is familiar enough.

Intelligent beings from another planet have developed advanced spacecraft and travelled across interstellar distances to visit Earth.

Perhaps they’re studying us.

Perhaps they’re collecting biological specimens.

Perhaps they’re monitoring our nuclear weapons.

Perhaps they possess some other purpose that we haven't understood.

It's a perfectly legitimate speculative possibility.

The universe is enormous.

There are vast numbers of planets.

And it would be surprising if Earth were the only place where intelligence had emerged.

But the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence and the claim that extraterrestrials are visiting Earth are two different propositions.

One doesn't establish the other.

And the UFO phenomenon has always contained elements that seem oddly inconsistent with the straightforward idea of scientific visitors from another planet.

The strange behaviour.

The theatrical encounters.

The apparent absurdities.

The creatures who resemble figures from folklore.

The objects that appear, perform abrupt manoeuvres and then disappear without leaving anything that can be examined.

It's almost as though the phenomenon wants to be seen.

But not understood.

Jacques Vallée recognised this difficulty.

And it was one of the reasons his work interested me so much.

Perhaps the phenomenon wasn't extraterrestrial.

Perhaps it was something much closer to home.

My own increasingly extravagant hypothesis offered another possibility.

What if the visitors weren't visitors at all?

What if they'd been here longer than we had?

Not aliens from another planet.

Aliens in the older sense.

A population that didn't belong to our civilisation.

A people who had withdrawn from ordinary human society.

A surviving branch of humanity.

Perhaps Neanderthals.

Perhaps something descended from them.

Perhaps a population that had spent tens of thousands of years developing along an entirely different technological and cultural path.

The idea was fictional.

There was no evidence establishing that such a civilisation existed.

But it possessed one immediate advantage over the extraterrestrial hypothesis.

It didn't require anybody to cross interstellar space.

The supposed visitors were already here.

They'd simply been keeping out of our way.

And perhaps, from time to time, they allowed us to notice them.

I was reminded of an experience I'd had in Suffolk.

It was probably late summer 2022.

I was driving along the lane from Santon Downham towards Brandon.

A familiar road.

I'd travelled it many times.

The surrounding landscape is typical of that part of East Anglia.

Woodland.

Open stretches.

Old tracks.

And occasional archaeological features that most motorists pass without noticing.

There was a Bronze Age mound visible from the lane.

I knew it was there.

And as I approached, I looked towards it.

Two deer were standing on the mound.

One pure white.

The other pure black.

They were positioned almost symmetrically.

And both appeared to be looking directly at me.

It was an extraordinary sight.

Not because deer are unusual in Suffolk.

They're not.

Nor because unusual colouration is impossible.

White deer occur naturally, often through leucism or other inherited variations in pigmentation.

Very dark deer can also occur.

But the combination was remarkable.

A white deer.

A black deer.

Standing together.
On an ancient mound.
Looking towards the road.
They seemed almost deliberately arranged.
Like figures in a medieval painting.
Or creatures from heraldry.
The sort of image one might find decorating the shield of an
imaginary knight.
Two deer.
Black and white.
Guardians of an ancient place.
I slowed and looked.
The animals remained where they were.
For a moment, the whole scene seemed to possess an unnat-
ural stillness.
The mound.
The deer.
The symmetry.
The surrounding countryside.
It looked composed.
As though somebody had arranged it for a photograph.
Or a message.
Naturally, I immediately suspected the Neanderthals.
Who else?
My imaginary Hyperboreans had apparently decided that I
needed another little demonstration.

Two deer.

One white.

One black.

Perfectly positioned on a Bronze Age mound.

“That should get him thinking.”

“Do you think he’ll understand?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why do it?”

“Because it’s amusing.”

I could almost hear them.

And I found the idea delightful.

Not because I seriously believed I’d established Neanderthal involvement.

I hadn’t.

But because the scene fitted the fictional model so beautifully.

A prehistoric mound.

Two unusually coloured animals.

A moment of apparent communication.

And the unmistakable feeling that something was being presented for my attention.

The important distinction was between what I saw and what I imagined.

I saw two deer.

One white.

One black.

Standing on a mound.

Everything else was interpretation.
But interpretation is where the mind begins to do its more interesting work.
The animals seemed intelligent.
That was my immediate impression.
Not merely alert.
Not simply watching a passing vehicle.
They appeared to possess a peculiar awareness.
As though they understood the significance of their position.
As though they were participating in something.
Of course, deer are intelligent animals.
They observe their surroundings.
Recognise danger.
Learn from experience.
And respond to unfamiliar situations.
There was no reason to suppose these two possessed anything beyond ordinary deer cognition.
But the impression remained.
A pair of animals looking directly towards me.
And appearing, for a brief moment, almost like emissaries.
Representatives of some other order of existence.
A world that shared the landscape with us.
But generally remained beyond our attention.
There's a curious tendency in human beings to underestimate the intelligence of other animals.
We measure intelligence according to our own interests.

Language.

Tool use.

Abstract reasoning.

Technological development.

And then decide that creatures who don't excel in these particular areas must be intellectually inferior.

But a deer possesses forms of awareness that are highly sophisticated.

It can detect subtle changes in its environment.

Interpret scent.

Recognise movement.

Navigate complex terrain.

Respond to threats that a human being might not even notice.

Its consciousness is adapted to a different way of living.

And perhaps, from the deer's point of view, the human being sitting inside a noisy metal box is a rather peculiar creature.

One that has lost many of the abilities necessary for direct participation in the landscape.

The deer knows the forest.

The human knows the road.

Which is the more intelligent?

It depends upon the question.

I continued my journey.

The deer remained behind.

But the image stayed with me.

Black and white.

An ancient mound.

A moment of apparent recognition.

And the possibility that the ordinary world might contain forms of intelligence that we barely understood.

Not necessarily supernatural.

Not necessarily extraterrestrial.

Simply different.

And perhaps hidden in plain sight.

Early in 2026, I encountered a group of volunteers near Croxton.

They were helping toads cross the road.

The animals were moving between the Devil's Punchbowl side and the Fowl Mere side.

A seasonal migration.

The sort of natural event that occurs every year but is easily overlooked by motorists.

The volunteers were there to prevent the toads from being flattened by passing vehicles.

An admirable occupation.

And a rather charming one.

There was something wonderfully English about it.

A group of people standing beside a country road, carefully assisting small amphibians with their travel arrangements.

No great ceremony.

No public spectacle.

Just a practical effort to help the local wildlife survive.

I stopped and talked to them.

They were a friendly group.

Amateur naturalists.

People who knew the area and cared about the creatures inhabiting it.

I spoke to several of them.

And eventually to the man who appeared to be organising the operation.

He was perhaps around forty.

A practical fellow.

Down to earth.

Not somebody who seemed particularly interested in extravagant speculation.

Which made him an ideal person to tell about the deer.

I described the experience.

The Bronze Age mound.

The white deer.

The black deer.

Their symmetry.

The way they'd appeared to be looking directly at me.

He listened.

Then shook his head.

"Some funny stuff happens around here," he said.

And that was it.

No elaborate explanation.

No attempt to turn the experience into a supernatural revelation.

Just a brief acknowledgement that the district occasionally produced unusual sights.

I liked that.

He might equally have said:

“There’s some rum stuff go on in these here parts.”

Which would have been entirely appropriate.

We continued talking.

The subject moved to the nearby military training land.

The villages that had once existed within the area.

The wartime requisition of land by the Ministry of Defence.

Places such as West Tofts.

Communities whose inhabitants had been required to leave their homes.

The understanding, in some cases, was that they might eventually return.

But the military retained the land.

And the villages never resumed their former lives.

It was a remarkable episode in the history of the district.

Entire communities displaced.

Homes abandoned.

Churches left standing in landscapes increasingly dominated by military activity.

The man told me that his wife’s grandfather had lived in one of the affected villages.

Possibly West Tofts.

He’d been moved out.

And, according to the account I was given, the displaced residents received arrangements covering their rent for the rest of their lives.

I haven't checked the precise terms of those arrangements.
Nor whether they applied equally to tenants and homeowners.
But the family story was memorable.
The grandfather had lived to ninety-seven.
"He cost the MoD," the man said.
I laughed.
An elderly East Anglian continuing to collect the consequences
of a wartime government decision for decades afterwards.
A small, stubborn victory.
Not quite Robin Hood.
But I suspect the Mound People would have approved.
There was something interesting about that conversation.
We'd begun with toads.
Moved to unusual deer.
And ended with the displacement of entire villages by the military.
All within a relatively small stretch of Suffolk countryside.
The landscape contained multiple histories.
Natural.
Human.
Military.
Archaeological.
And, in my imagination, perhaps something else.
An older history.
One that had never been properly recorded.
A population living beneath the familiar world.

Watching successive waves of Homo sapiens arrive, settle, fight, build, destroy and move on.

The Neanderthals might have found the requisition of the villages particularly revealing.

Here were human beings removing other human beings from their homes in the interests of military preparation.

A familiar pattern.

Perhaps one that had been repeated in different forms for tens of thousands of years.

The hidden people would have recognised it immediately.

Another example of the surface population's talent for reorganising the lives of others.

The military presence in East Anglia added another layer to the story.

RAF Mildenhall.

RAF Lakenheath.

The Stanford Training Area.

Restricted land.

Aircraft.

Unusual lights.

Unfamiliar sounds.

And a landscape containing numerous prehistoric sites.

There was no need to invent a conspiracy.

Military activity provides plenty of ordinary explanations for unusual aerial observations.

And restricted land can preserve archaeological remains precisely because ordinary development has been prevented.

But within my speculative model, the combination was irresistible.

What if the hidden people had occupied the district long before the military arrived?

What if some of the ancient mounds marked places associated with their underground routes?

What if the military installations had been constructed above a landscape containing features whose original significance had been forgotten?

And what if the strange objects occasionally seen around the area weren't necessarily military aircraft?

Nor extraterrestrial spacecraft?

What if they belonged to the people beneath England?

I remembered the dark-red flotilla near Wyrley's Drove.

Silent objects moving together through the night.

The earlier flotilla I'd witnessed in Norwich.

The brilliantly illuminated craft near Frog Hill.

And the strange creatures I'd encountered in the countryside.

I had no evidence that these events shared a common origin.

But the similarities were suggestive enough to support a fictional connection.

Perhaps the hidden people possessed aerial vehicles.

Perhaps they'd developed forms of propulsion that differed fundamentally from ours.

Perhaps their technology relied upon physical principles that Homo sapiens had only begun to explore.

And perhaps their craft could move between subterranean settlements and the surface world.

The objects might appear over forests.

Military land.

Remote roads.

Or occasionally cities.

They might perform abrupt manoeuvres.

Then disappear.

Not because they were returning to another star system.

But because they were returning home.

Beneath the Earth.

That possibility changed the entire UFO narrative.

Instead of asking why extraterrestrials would travel across enormous distances to visit Earth, we could ask why a concealed terrestrial population might occasionally reveal itself.

The motives would be different.

Perhaps they were monitoring us.

Perhaps they were studying our technological development.

Perhaps they were concerned about environmental destruction.

Perhaps they were attempting to influence human culture.

Or perhaps they simply needed to travel between locations.

And occasionally somebody happened to see them.

Not every unusual aerial observation would need to be a deliberate demonstration.

Some might be accidents.

A vehicle seen at the wrong moment.

A journey interrupted.

A technological malfunction.

Or a concealed population becoming slightly less careful than it had once been.

I liked that.

It made the phenomenon seem less grandiose.

Less cosmic.

And, in a peculiar way, more believable as fiction.

The visitors weren't gods.

They weren't saviours.

They weren't representatives of a galactic federation.

They were neighbours.

Very unusual neighbours.

But neighbours nonetheless.

Of course, the hypothesis raised enormous practical questions.

How could a subterranean civilisation manufacture sophisticated vehicles?

Where would it obtain materials?

How would it generate energy?

How would it maintain its population?

How could it remain undetected in an age of satellites, geological surveys and increasingly sophisticated monitoring technologies?

These were serious objections.

And any attempt to present the idea as established fact would have to address them.

I couldn't.

But I could imagine possible answers.

A civilisation that had developed slowly over tens of thousands of years might possess technologies almost entirely unfamiliar to us.

Perhaps its manufacturing processes were biological.

Perhaps its structures were grown rather than constructed.

Perhaps its energy systems were integrated into geological processes.

Perhaps its population was relatively small.

Perhaps its settlements were distributed across regions that ordinary human activity rarely reached.

Or perhaps the hidden people had developed methods of concealment so effective that we were looking directly at their activities without recognising them.

That last possibility interested me most.

Because it returned us to the question of perception.

What do we actually see?

And how much of what we see is determined by what we expect to find?

The two deer on the mound had demonstrated the problem beautifully.

Objectively, I had seen two animals.

But the arrangement had immediately suggested something more.

A symbolic tableau.

An encounter.

A message.

A deliberate presentation.

Perhaps that interpretation was entirely fanciful.

But it had arisen naturally.

And it had altered my experience of the landscape.

The mound was no longer merely an archaeological feature.

It had become the setting for a strange encounter.

The deer were no longer simply animals.

They had become characters in a possible story.

And the surrounding countryside seemed, for a moment, to possess an additional layer of meaning.

That was the essential process.

An ordinary observation.

An unusual arrangement.

An imaginative interpretation.

And the possibility that the interpretation might reveal something worth investigating.

The danger was confusing the interpretation with the observation.

The opportunity was using the interpretation to generate new questions.

I began thinking about the word alien again.

A foreigner.

An outsider.

Somebody who doesn't belong.

But belonging is a curious concept.

The Neanderthals had inhabited Europe long before the arrival of Homo sapiens.

If a surviving Neanderthal population existed, who would be the aliens?

Us?

Or them?

We tend to assume that the world belongs to the people currently occupying it.

But history is full of populations displacing one another.

Sometimes through violence.

Sometimes through migration.

Sometimes through gradual demographic change.

And sometimes through processes so complex that no single explanation is sufficient.

Perhaps the Neanderthals, within my fictional model, had simply withdrawn from a world that was becoming increasingly dominated by another kind of human being.

They hadn't left Earth.

They'd left us.

And now, tens of thousands of years later, we were beginning to notice them again.

I imagined a conversation with one of the hidden people.

"Where do you come from?"

"Here."

"No, I mean originally."

"Here."

"What planet?"

"Earth."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Why?"

"Because you're obviously an alien."

"To whom?"

"To us."

"Ah."

The Neanderthal considered the matter.

“We were here first.”

A rather awkward conversation.

Especially if the visitor could produce documentary evidence.

Or whatever passed for documentary evidence in a civilisation older than our own.

Perhaps a collection of records extending back forty thousand years.

Perhaps memories preserved through technologies we couldn't understand.

Perhaps an entire history of Homo sapiens, observed from the outside.

That would be a remarkable discovery.

Not simply another intelligent population.

But another account of our own history.

A history written by people who hadn't participated in our civilisation.

Who hadn't shared our assumptions.

And who might possess a rather different interpretation of our achievements.

What would they make of our religions?

Our political systems?

Our economic arrangements?

Our wars?

Our ability to organise ourselves into competing groups?

Perhaps they'd regard many of our institutions as elaborate forms of ritual.

People gathering in large buildings.

Repeating prescribed phrases.

Wearing distinctive clothing.

Making symbolic gestures.

And attempting to influence events through collective belief.

Parliament.

Stock exchanges.

Corporate boardrooms.

Religious ceremonies.

Football matches.

From a sufficiently detached perspective, the differences might appear less significant than we imagine.

Perhaps the hidden people would regard *Homo sapiens* as an intensely ritualistic species.

A population that continually constructs symbolic systems and then behaves as though those systems possess independent reality.

Money.

Nations.

Status.

Authority.

Prestige.

All immensely powerful.

All dependent upon shared human agreement.

And occasionally capable of driving people towards acts of violence.

Perhaps the Neanderthals had noticed this tendency long ago.

And decided that the safest course was to withdraw.

But perhaps they also recognised something admirable.

Human creativity.

Art.

Music.

Literature.

Scientific discovery.

The ability to imagine possibilities that don't yet exist.

The same mental capacity that produces dangerous ideological obsessions can also produce great beauty.

A symphony.

A novel.

A painting.

A mathematical insight.

A new technology.

Perhaps the hidden people were fascinated by this contradiction.

Homo sapiens could be destructive.

But also astonishingly inventive.

Perhaps they were watching to see whether we could learn to manage our own minds.

Whether we could recognise the difference between an idea and a fact.

Between a grievance and an actual threat.

Between an imagined enemy and a real one.

Between a useful model of reality and a belief that had become dangerously rigid.

Perhaps that was the real purpose of their occasional appearances.

Not to demonstrate superior technology.

But to disrupt our assumptions.

To remind us that our understanding of the world remained incomplete.

I thought again about the toad volunteers.

Ordinary people doing something practical and kind.

Helping small creatures survive a dangerous crossing.

There was something reassuring about it.

Homo sapiens weren't simply a destructive species.

We were capable of compassion.

Even towards animals that offered us no obvious material benefit.

The volunteers weren't helping the toads because they expected payment.

Nor because they wanted power.

They were doing it because the creatures mattered to them.

Perhaps the hidden people would have appreciated that.

Perhaps they'd been watching.

Noting that some humans were capable of recognising the needs of other forms of life.

And acting accordingly.

A small event.

But perhaps more significant than many of the grand political declarations that dominate human history.

I imagined a Neanderthal observer reporting back.

"Anything interesting today?"

"Yes."

“What?”

“A group of humans helped some toads cross a road.”

“Why?”

“To prevent them being killed.”

“Remarkable.”

“Indeed.”

“Perhaps there’s hope for them yet.”

The black and white deer remained in my memory.

Standing on the mound.

Looking towards me.

A moment that seemed almost designed to attract attention.

I couldn’t prove that anything unusual had occurred beyond the presence of two differently coloured animals.

But the experience had become part of my personal geography.

Another place in Suffolk where the familiar world had briefly seemed to acquire an additional dimension.

And that was enough.

I didn’t need to establish that the deer were supernatural.

Or that the Neanderthals had arranged their appearance.

Or that the mound concealed an entrance to Hyperborea.

The possibility was enjoyable.

The experience was memorable.

And the questions it raised were worth exploring.

Perhaps that was the real problem with the extraterrestrial hypothesis.

It encouraged us to look too far away.

Towards the stars.

Towards distant planets.

Towards civilisations separated from us by unimaginable distances.

And perhaps, in doing so, we overlooked the mysteries immediately around us.

The forests.

The ancient mounds.

The underground places.

The animals.

The strange encounters.

The possibility that intelligence might exist in forms we hadn't learned to recognise.

Not necessarily hidden Neanderthals.

Perhaps something entirely different.

Perhaps simply aspects of the natural world that our habits of perception prevented us from noticing.

But the question remained.

How would we recognise another intelligence if it didn't announce itself in a form we expected?

Would we see it?

Or would we explain it away?

Would we regard it as an animal?

A ghost?

A monster?

A fairy?

An extraterrestrial?

Or perhaps merely an eccentric human being?
I imagined the hidden people watching us search the skies.
Our telescopes.
Our satellites.
Our radio receivers.
Our scientific instruments.
Our elaborate programmes designed to detect signals from distant civilisations.
All perfectly worthwhile activities.
But perhaps the Neanderthals found them rather amusing.
“Still looking for aliens?”
“Yes.”
“Where?”
“Other planets.”
“Have they looked beneath their feet?”
“No.”
“Interesting.”
“Should we tell them?”
“Not yet.”
“Why?”
“Let’s see how long it takes.”
I thought about the old stories again.
The Green Children of Woolpit.
The man from the sea at Orford.
The woodwoses carved into Suffolk churches.
The Mound People.

The strange creatures I'd encountered in the countryside.
The objects moving through the night sky.
Perhaps none of them were connected.
Perhaps they belonged to entirely different categories of experience.
Folklore.
Misidentification.
Imagination.
Unusual natural phenomena.
And events whose explanations had simply been lost.
That was the cautious interpretation.
But within my fictional Hyperborean model, they formed a remarkable pattern.
A concealed population.
Occasional appearances.
Encounters interpreted through the beliefs of the witnesses.
And a long history of human beings attempting to explain something they didn't understand.
Perhaps the visitors had never been extraterrestrial.
Perhaps they'd always been terrestrial.
Perhaps they'd been here before us.
And perhaps they were still here.
The next time you find yourself in the countryside, try an experiment.
Look at the sky.
You'll see clouds.
Birds.

Aircraft.

Perhaps a satellite.

Perhaps something you can't immediately identify.

Then look at the landscape.

The trees.

The fields.

The animals.

The old buildings.

The ancient earthworks.

The places where the ground rises unexpectedly.

The entrances to caves.

The dark spaces beneath roots and rocks.

The features that don't quite fit the surrounding terrain.

And consider the possibility that the world contains more than you ordinarily notice.

Not necessarily supernatural beings.

Not necessarily hidden Neanderthals.

Simply things that escape your habitual attention.

Because we tend to see what we're looking for.

And overlook what we aren't.

I imagined the two deer again.

White and black.

Standing upon the ancient mound.

Watching me.

Perhaps they'd simply been curious about the passing car.

Perhaps the symmetry was accidental.

Perhaps the entire significance of the scene existed only in my imagination.

But I couldn't resist giving them a final line.

As though they were speaking on behalf of the hidden people.

"Haven't you worked it out yet?"

"Worked what out?"

"You're looking in the wrong direction."

"Where should I look?"

"Not always up."

"Then where?"

"Look ahead."

"At what?"

"Your world."

"And?"

"Look beneath it."

Perhaps the UFOs were never extraterrestrial.

Perhaps the aliens were never aliens.

Perhaps the visitors were never visitors.

Perhaps they'd been living here all along.

And perhaps the greatest mystery wasn't where they came from.

But why we'd failed to notice them.

End of Chapter Seven

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE LONG ACCOMMODATION

The strange thing about anomalous experiences is that they don't necessarily behave like ordinary events.

You see something.

Or hear something.

Or encounter somebody who appears to belong to an entirely different order of existence.

And then it's over.

You return to whatever you were doing.

Make a cup of tea.

Answer the telephone.

Go shopping.

Life continues.

But the experience remains.

Not necessarily as a problem.

More as an unresolved presence.

Something that doesn't fit comfortably into the usual categories.

And, if you're anything like me, you don't feel particularly obliged to resolve it.

You simply add it to the collection.

I've often wondered why the anomalous experiences in my life seemed to increase after I moved to Beck Row in West Suffolk in late March 2021.

There had been unusual experiences before.

Quite a few.

But something about that period seemed to mark a change.

The strange cries near Croxton.

The animals.

The objects in the sky.

The encounters around the military land.

The sense that the landscape had become increasingly active.

Or perhaps I had.

Perhaps I was simply spending more time exploring remote places.

Paying closer attention.

Looking for things that other people passed without noticing.

That would be a reasonable explanation.

But it didn't entirely account for the impression.

The impression was that something had changed.

Not necessarily in the external world.

Perhaps in my relationship with it.

The idea of two populations occupying the same planet without necessarily recognising one another was becoming increasingly attractive.

My imaginary Neanderthals had withdrawn underground.
Over thousands of years they'd developed an entirely different civilisation.
Different technologies.
Different values.
Different ways of thinking.
And perhaps, eventually, different ways of experiencing reality.
This last possibility interested me most.
Because it raised a question I'd previously overlooked.
What if the Neanderthals hadn't merely developed different machines?
What if they'd developed different minds?
Not necessarily larger brains.
Not greater intelligence in some crude competitive sense.
But different relationships between consciousness, perception and the physical environment.
Homo sapiens had developed a formidable capacity for manipulating the external world.
We'd built cities.
Manufactured machines.
Transformed landscapes.
Split the atom.
Sent spacecraft beyond the Earth.
And created technologies capable of processing information at astonishing speeds.
But our understanding of our own consciousness remained incomplete.

We could measure neural activity.

Study perception.

Investigate memory.

Examine the biological processes associated with experience.

Yet the subjective fact of being conscious remained philosophically troublesome.

Perhaps our imaginary Neanderthals had taken another route.

Perhaps they'd spent tens of thousands of years investigating the relationship between mind and world.

Not as an abstract philosophical question.

But as a practical technology.

This would require a very different idea of progress.

Imagine a civilisation in which the most important developments weren't new weapons, faster vehicles or more efficient methods of industrial production.

Instead, the central concern was the refinement of consciousness.

Attention.

Perception.

Memory.

Dreaming.

Communication.

The ability to alter one's relationship with experience.

Perhaps such a civilisation would regard many of our technological achievements as rather crude.

We've developed machines to carry information across the planet.

Perhaps they'd developed methods of communication that

didn't require machines in the conventional sense.

We've developed enormous industries to manipulate physical materials.

Perhaps they'd learned to work with biological processes, growing structures and devices rather than manufacturing them.

We've developed elaborate systems for recording and storing information.

Perhaps they'd discovered forms of memory that we wouldn't immediately recognise.

And perhaps they'd become so different from their prehistoric ancestors that a modern *Homo sapiens* encountering one would struggle to understand what he was seeing.

An ancient relative.

Transformed beyond recognition.

That possibility brought me back to the strange creatures I'd encountered in the Suffolk and Norfolk countryside.

The calf-sized animal with the elongated face.

The fast-moving reptilian-looking creature near Elveden.

The peculiar impression that these beings were amused by me.

What if my brain had been attempting to interpret something unfamiliar?

Something that didn't correspond neatly to any animal I knew?

Human perception isn't a passive recording system.

The brain continually interprets sensory information.

It draws upon previous experience.

Constructs expectations.

Fills gaps.

Attempts to produce a coherent picture.

Usually this works extremely well.

But when confronted with something genuinely unfamiliar, the result can be strange.

Perhaps I'd seen an ordinary animal under unusual conditions.

Perhaps I'd misinterpreted its appearance or movement.

But within the Hyperborean model, another possibility emerged.

What if I'd encountered something so different that my brain had assembled the nearest available approximation?

A creature from Alice in Wonderland.

An animal from a science-fiction film.

Something recognisable enough to describe.

But fundamentally wrong.

There was another category of experience that seemed relevant.

Dreams.

Not ordinary dreams involving the day's activities rearranged into peculiar narratives.

Something more persistent.

A recurring presence.

A figure who appeared over many years.

In my case, almost a lifetime.

My earliest recollections go back to when I was perhaps two years old.

There was a female presence in my dreams.

At first she seemed like a fairy.

Or a luminous being.

Something gentle and unfamiliar.
As I grew older, she appeared as a girl.
And the relationship developed.
By the time I was around ten, I might dream that we were walking together in a country park.
Or sitting somewhere in the landscape.
We were friends.
But there was something deeper.
A feeling of love.
Not merely childhood affection.
Something that seemed complete.
The dreams weren't constant.
They occurred occasionally.
Sometimes with long intervals between them.
But the figure remained recognisable.
As though I were meeting the same person again.
As I grew older, the dreams changed.
The girl became a woman.
The relationship became romantic.
Sometimes amorous.
We might find ourselves in familiar places.
One recurring setting was the hedge-lined footpath beside Stewkley Church.
A place I'd known since childhood.
But in the dream it possessed another quality.
As though the ordinary landscape had been transformed.

Or perhaps overlaid by another version of itself.
The woman and I would walk together.
Talk.
Sometimes simply remain in one another's company.
And there was always the same impression.
We belonged together.
Not merely in the ordinary romantic sense.
But somehow beyond time.
As though the relationship had always existed.
And always would.
Now, I realise how extravagant that sounds.
A mysterious woman appearing in dreams over decades.
An apparently eternal relationship.
A sense of recognition extending beyond ordinary memory.
One could construct any number of explanations.
A recurring dream character.
An idealised attachment figure.
A stable imaginative representation of love.
A psychological symbol.
Perhaps an expression of needs and expectations that developed during childhood and persisted into adulthood.
All reasonable possibilities.
And I wouldn't dismiss them.
But the subjective experience was rather different.
It didn't feel as though I were inventing the woman.
It felt as though I were meeting her.

That distinction is important.

Not because the feeling establishes an external reality.

It doesn't.

But because it accurately describes the experience.

There was another curious feature.

Her voice and manner.

She was what British society would call distinctly middle class.

Quiet.

Cultured.

Composed.

An educated voice.

A certain decorum.

This remained remarkably consistent.

Even when the circumstances of the dreams changed.

And sometimes, after waking, I experienced a mild euphoria that could last for a couple of days.

A sense of happiness that lingered.

As though I'd briefly visited somewhere more complete than ordinary life.

Then the feeling would gradually fade.

And I'd return to the usual business of being a human being.

The dreams continued through adulthood.

Through relationships.

Marriage.

Fatherhood.

Work.

All the ordinary developments of life.

I didn't discuss them.

They belonged to a private part of my experience.

And I didn't particularly feel the need to explain them to anybody.

But the impression persisted.

The woman existed somewhere.

Not necessarily in physical reality.

Perhaps in a dream world.

Perhaps in an alternative timeline.

Perhaps in some dimension of consciousness that ordinary waking experience rarely touches.

Philip K. Dick would have understood the attraction of that possibility.

He was fascinated by the idea that reality might contain overlapping histories.

Different worlds.

Alternative versions of events.

And that consciousness might occasionally become aware of them.

I didn't need to adopt his metaphysics.

But I recognised the territory.

Then something happened that made the entire question considerably more troublesome.

It involved a woman I knew.

For the purposes of this account, I'll call her Marianne.

We were speaking through a video connection.

And during one of our conversations, she entered what appeared to be a trance.

At first, the change was relatively slight.

Her manner altered.

Her voice became different.

There seemed to be another aspect of her personality emerging.

I was interested.

Not particularly alarmed.

Altered states of consciousness were familiar territory to me.

People can enter remarkably different psychological conditions.

Hypnosis.

Dissociation.

Absorption.

Dreamlike states.

And experiences in which their ordinary sense of identity changes.

But this particular episode developed in an unexpected direction.

Over subsequent conversations, a different personality seemed to emerge.

At least, that was my perception.

Marianne was American.

She spoke with a recognisable Southern American accent.

But during these episodes, her voice changed.

Not simply the words.

The tonality.

The rhythm.

The entire manner of speaking.

The personality I seemed to be encountering possessed a distinctly British voice.

Educated.

Middle class.

Quietly assured.

And, to my ear, remarkably convincing.

I couldn't reconcile it with Marianne's ordinary manner of speaking.

Nor with her previous attempts at imitating British accents.

This was different.

The change was so complete that I found myself responding as though I were speaking to another person.

I should be careful here.

A convincing accent isn't evidence of a separate identity.

People can produce striking changes in speech during altered states.

And the perception that somebody's face has changed can arise through expression, lighting, expectation and other factors.

I didn't have controlled recordings or independent observations capable of establishing precisely what was happening.

What I can say is that the experience was extraordinary.

The woman on the screen appeared different.

Her voice sounded different.

And the personality I encountered seemed to possess a history and manner entirely unlike Marianne's ordinary presentation.

I found myself talking to her naturally.
As though we'd known one another for years.
At one point we were teasing one another.
A little bickering.
Nothing serious.
The sort of affectionate exchange that might occur between a couple who'd been married for years.
There was an immediate familiarity.
A sense of shared history.
And the woman seemed to recognise me in a way I couldn't explain.
It was deeply peculiar.
But I wasn't frightened.
I was curious.
I wanted to know what was happening.
So I continued the conversation.
During one episode, the woman spoke about ancient times.
She suggested that she and I had known one another across immense periods.
That we repeatedly came together.
Different lives.
Different circumstances.
But the same underlying relationship.
I asked where this had begun.
She described something ancient.
A place or civilisation far removed from the present world.

I asked her name.

She told me.

And I couldn't repeat it.

It was a long, unfamiliar arrangement of sounds.

The sort of word one might encounter in Gurdjieff's Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson.

I tried to pronounce it.

Failed.

Asked her to repeat it.

Tried again.

Failed again.

Eventually I gave up.

I hadn't anticipated the episode and had no recording available.

So the name was lost.

An irritating outcome.

One might think that a mysterious visitor claiming an ancient relationship would at least have the courtesy to provide a reasonably pronounceable name.

But apparently not.

I wondered what civilisation she meant.

Atlantis?

Some other legendary country?

Then Hyperborea occurred to me.

It seemed to fit the atmosphere of the conversation.

The sheer antiquity.

The sense of a relationship extending across time.

The suggestion of a world that no longer existed in ordinary history.

I may even have asked whether Hyperborea was the place she meant.

My recollection isn't sufficiently precise to be certain.

But the association remained.

And it was difficult not to connect the experience with the woman who'd appeared in my dreams since childhood.

The same quality of voice.

The same manner.

The same sense of recognition.

The same suggestion of an enduring relationship.

It felt as though the dream figure had somehow entered an ordinary conversation.

Now, that is a remarkable claim.

And it requires careful handling.

I cannot establish that the woman in the trance was the woman from my dreams.

Nor that either existed independently of the minds involved.

Nor that the conversation revealed a genuine history extending back to some lost civilisation.

Those were interpretations.

But the experience itself was real in the straightforward autobiographical sense.

I was present.

I heard the voice.

I participated in the conversations.

And I had the distinct impression that I was speaking with

somebody other than the woman I'd originally called.

That was enough to make it one of the strangest experiences of my life.

Afterwards, Marianne had little or no recollection of what had been said.

That complicated matters.

She was understandably unsettled.

The possibility that she'd participated in conversations she couldn't remember was disturbing.

And I had no desire to make the situation worse by insisting upon some supernatural explanation.

I couldn't know what psychological processes were involved.

Nor whether the episodes had any relationship to other experiences in her life.

So I remained cautious.

But privately I wondered.

Was this simply an unusual altered state?

A dissociative phenomenon?

A form of imaginative absorption?

Or something belonging to the territory Vallée had called the phenomenon?

Something that appeared to operate through consciousness itself?

I didn't know.

And I still don't.

Years later, another woman I knew entered an unusual state during a telephone conversation.

Again, her voice changed.

Again, there seemed to be a different quality of consciousness.
Some of what she said appeared to echo the earlier experience.
But the connection was poor.

The sound was muffled.

And I couldn't hear everything clearly.

Afterwards, she didn't remember the episode in the way she normally remembered similar states.

I didn't press the matter.

There was little to be gained by turning an ambiguous experience into a grand revelation.

But the similarity interested me.

Two different people.

Two different circumstances.

And a peculiar suggestion of something emerging through an altered state of consciousness.

Perhaps entirely unrelated.

Perhaps psychologically explicable.

Perhaps simply another example of the mind's capacity for producing unusual experiences.

But I couldn't help adding it to the collection.

There are precedents for such reports in occult literature.

Aleister Crowley's reception of *The Book of the Law* in Cairo in 1904 is one example.

According to Crowley's account, his wife Rose played a significant role in the events leading to the supposed communication, while Crowley himself claimed to receive and write down the text dictated by a voice he identified as Aiwass.

Whatever happened, the episode became central to Crowley's religious and magical system.

One can interpret it in various ways.

A psychological event.

An imaginative production.

A religious experience.

A deliberate literary construction.

Or, if one accepts Crowley's interpretation, a communication from a nonhuman intelligence.

The historical record doesn't establish which metaphysical explanation, if any, is correct.

But the pattern is interesting.

An unusual state of consciousness.

A claimed communication.

A sense that information is arriving from somewhere beyond the ordinary personality.

And an attempt to understand the experience afterwards.

The same pattern appears in many cultures.

Shamanic traditions.

Mediumship.

Visionary religion.

Dream encounters.

Possession experiences.

Inspired speech.

The terminology changes.

So do the cultural interpretations.

But the broad phenomenon is familiar.

A person appears to enter a state in which another voice, identity or agency seems to emerge.

Sometimes the experience is meaningful.

Sometimes frightening.

Sometimes transformative.

Sometimes associated with distress.

And sometimes it may be little more than an unusual expression of ordinary psychological processes.

The difficulty is distinguishing among these possibilities.

Especially when the evidence consists primarily of subjective recollection.

I began wondering whether my imaginary Neanderthals might have developed a deep understanding of such states.

Perhaps they didn't communicate through radio signals.

Perhaps they didn't require physical meetings.

Perhaps they'd learned to work with the imaginative processes of the mind.

Dreams.

Images.

Voices.

Altered states.

The peculiar moments when ordinary identity becomes less rigid.

Within the Hyperborean model, these might be points of contact.

Not necessarily portals in the physical sense.

More like interfaces.

Places where two different systems of consciousness could briefly interact.

It was an extravagant idea.

But it offered a possible fictional explanation for the peculiar nature of anomalous encounters.

Why the visitors sometimes seemed dreamlike.

Why they appeared in culturally familiar forms.

Why their behaviour could be theatrical or absurd.

Why experiences could feel intensely real yet leave little objective evidence.

Perhaps the phenomenon wasn't simply entering physical space.

Perhaps it was interacting with the processes through which we construct our experience of physical space.

This would also explain something else.

The apparent difficulty of recognising the visitors.

Suppose the hidden Neanderthals had become so different from us that direct perception was almost impossible.

Not because they were invisible.

But because our brains lacked the appropriate categories.

We might perceive fragments.

A strange animal.

A humanlike figure.

A luminous object.

A presence.

A dream character.

Something that resembled whatever familiar form our minds could assemble.

The underlying reality, if there were one, might be entirely different.

Perhaps the strange creature near Elveden hadn't been rep-

tilian at all.

Perhaps the elongated-faced animal wasn't an animal in any ordinary sense.

Perhaps the UFOs weren't vehicles.

Perhaps they were manifestations of something we couldn't yet describe.

Or perhaps they were exactly what they appeared to be: unusual perceptions of ordinary things.

The point was that I didn't know.

And I wasn't inclined to pretend otherwise.

There was a temptation to explain everything.

The dreams.

The trances.

The animals.

The lights.

The mounds.

The old stories.

All of it.

One enormous theory.

One hidden civilisation.

One secret history.

But that would have been too convenient.

Reality doesn't necessarily organise itself according to the requirements of a good narrative.

A theory that explains everything may simply be a theory that cannot be tested.

So I preferred to regard Hyperborea as an imaginative model.

A way of exploring possibilities.

A means of connecting experiences without claiming that the connections had been established.

And perhaps a way of asking a more interesting question.

What if Homo sapiens had spent tens of thousands of years living alongside another form of intelligence without developing the perceptual or cultural equipment necessary to recognise it?

I thought about Chris Bledsoe.

The American whose accounts of UFO encounters and a mysterious female figure had attracted considerable attention.

His experiences were very different from mine.

And the public presentation of his story had become entangled with claims involving scientists, government personnel and intelligence-related figures.

I couldn't independently establish the more far-reaching interpretations.

Nor did I feel obliged to accept them.

But the recurring female figure caught my attention.

Not because it proved a connection.

It didn't.

But because it reminded me of something I'd experienced privately for much of my life.

The woman in the dreams.

The sense of recognition.

The impression of a relationship extending beyond ordinary time.

Perhaps such figures arise from common structures of human imagination.

Perhaps they're culturally shaped expressions of attachment, longing or archetypal imagery.

Or perhaps, within the imaginative territory of this book, they represent something else.

An interface.

A familiar form through which an unfamiliar intelligence might attempt communication.

I left the question open.

The longer I explored these ideas, the more I began to suspect that the distinction between the physical and the imaginal was central.

The imaginal isn't necessarily the same as the imaginary.

An imaginary event may be something we deliberately invent.

An imaginal experience can arise spontaneously, possess great vividness and produce lasting effects.

Dreams are an obvious example.

A dream may have no direct physical counterpart.

Yet it can alter your mood for days.

Change your understanding of a relationship.

Inspire a work of art.

Or influence a decision.

Its consequences are real.

Even when the events it depicts never occurred in waking life.

That seemed important.

Because many anomalous experiences possess precisely this quality.

They may be difficult to verify.

Difficult to repeat.

Difficult to classify.

Yet they can exert considerable influence upon the people who experience them.

They possess effects.

Even when their apparent substance remains elusive.

Perhaps the hidden people understood this better than we did.

Perhaps they'd learned that reality was not simply a collection of physical objects.

It was also a network of perceptions, interpretations, memories and expectations.

A civilisation capable of influencing those processes might possess considerable power.

Not necessarily the power to move mountains.

But the power to alter how another population understood its world.

And perhaps the Neanderthals had spent thousands of years doing precisely that.

Not controlling Homo sapiens.

Not manipulating every historical event.

But occasionally introducing unfamiliar possibilities.

A strange figure in a forest.

A dream.

A luminous object.

A mysterious visitor.

Something that interrupted the ordinary assumptions of the witness.

And encouraged a different way of thinking.

I imagined the hidden people discussing the problem.

“Are they ready?”

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“They still insist that everything must fit their existing categories.”

“Even when it doesn’t?”

“Especially when it doesn’t.”

“What happens when they encounter something unfamiliar?”

“They either dismiss it or turn it into a religion.”

“That must be inconvenient.”

“Extremely.”

“Perhaps we should explain.”

“We’ve tried.”

“And?”

“They formed committees.”

There was another problem.

Homo sapiens had become deeply dependent upon consensus reality.

Not simply the shared recognition of physical facts.

That was necessary.

But the enormous collection of social assumptions through which modern civilisation operated.

Money.

Employment.

Status.

Economic growth.

Political authority.

Institutional legitimacy.

The belief that certain arrangements were natural and inevitable.

Most of these were human constructions.

Useful, perhaps.

Sometimes indispensable.

But constructions nonetheless.

And they could become so deeply embedded in ordinary consciousness that people struggled to imagine alternatives.

Perhaps that was what my fictional Neanderthals found most peculiar.

Homo sapiens possessed astonishing imaginative abilities.

Yet frequently used them to defend systems that were plainly damaging the conditions of their own existence.

We could imagine worlds.

But often couldn't imagine changing the one we'd built.

I wondered what would happen if increasing numbers of people began questioning those assumptions.

Not abandoning rational thought.

Not rejecting science.

But recognising that the prevailing arrangements of society weren't necessarily the only possible ones.

Perhaps economic systems based upon endless expansion would begin to seem less inevitable.

Perhaps technological development would become more closely associated with ecological balance.

Perhaps people would begin considering forms of production that worked with living systems rather than continually ex-

tracting and destroying.

Biological manufacturing.

Materials grown rather than mined and processed.

Technologies designed for repair, regeneration and long-term stability.

Some of these ideas already exist within human science and engineering.

They don't require hidden Neanderthals.

But perhaps, within my fictional model, the Hyperboreans had developed them much further.

And perhaps they were becoming concerned that Homo sapiens might destroy the environment before learning how to live within it.

The long accommodation between the two populations would therefore involve more than physical coexistence.

It would involve a gradual adjustment of human consciousness.

Not necessarily through direct instruction.

Perhaps through encounters.

Experiences.

Questions.

The introduction of unfamiliar possibilities.

A slow erosion of the assumption that Homo sapiens possessed the only valid way of understanding the world.

Perhaps the hidden people had been doing this for centuries.

Or millennia.

Not because they wanted to rule us.

But because they wanted to survive alongside us.

And because our behaviour increasingly affected the entire planet.

Their planet too.

I thought again about the woman in my dreams.

The quiet voice.

The sense of an ancient relationship.

The happiness that sometimes followed our meetings.

Was she simply a recurring dream figure?

Probably.

At least, that was the explanation requiring the fewest additional assumptions.

But I couldn't dismiss the experience as meaningless.

It had accompanied me for almost my entire life.

And it had influenced the way I thought about love, identity, time and consciousness.

Then there had been the strange conversations through Marianne.

The apparent emergence of another personality.

The unfamiliar name.

The suggestion of ancient cycles.

The impression of recognition.

I didn't know what had happened.

But I knew how I'd experienced it.

And I wasn't going to pretend otherwise merely because the experience was difficult to explain.

Perhaps that was the attitude I'd developed as a child in Stewkley.

Mr Guinn had introduced us to folklore.

The old stories.

The strange possibilities associated with familiar places.

I'd walked widdershins around a telegraph pole.

Seen something like a werewolf behind the school fence.

Watched unusual objects in the sky.

And gradually learned to regard the world as something considerably more interesting than its conventional description.

Not necessarily supernatural.

Not necessarily magical.

But open.

Unfinished.

Full of questions.

And occasionally capable of producing experiences that didn't fit.

There was no need to become frightened.

No need to construct an elaborate belief system.

No need to insist that every strange occurrence revealed a hidden truth.

One could simply observe.

Ask questions.

Consider possibilities.

And remain aware of the distinction between experience and interpretation.

That seemed a reasonable way to proceed.

And it had served me well enough.

Something unusual happens.

I look.

I listen.

I think.

Perhaps I investigate.

Perhaps I imagine a story.

Then I make a cup of tea.

Life continues.

I wondered whether the Neanderthals would approve.

Perhaps their civilisation had developed precisely this attitude.

A willingness to experience without immediately imposing an explanation.

An ability to remain comfortable with uncertainty.

A recognition that the mind continually constructs models of reality.

And that those models should remain provisional.

Perhaps this was the real difference between the two populations.

Homo sapiens had become skilled at imposing its ideas upon the world.

The Neanderthals had become skilled at allowing the world to reveal itself.

An attractive contrast.

Probably far too neat.

But useful within the story.

I imagined the hidden people watching us.

Not from a distant planet.

Not from some supernatural heaven.
But from a civilisation that had developed alongside our own.
A population that had spent tens of thousands of years learning how to remain concealed.
And perhaps, increasingly, wondering whether concealment was still possible.
Human technology was advancing rapidly.
Our instruments were becoming more sophisticated.
Our ability to explore and monitor the planet was expanding.
But our social and psychological development remained uneven.
We possessed powers of our own.
And sometimes the judgement of quarrelsome children.
Perhaps the hidden people were concerned.
Perhaps they were considering contact.
Not a dramatic announcement.
Not spacecraft landing outside the United Nations.
Not a delegation of Neanderthals appearing on television.
Something quieter.
A gradual recognition.
A series of encounters.
A change in the way people understood their place within the world.
And perhaps some of us had already encountered them.
Without knowing it.
Perhaps the strange creatures were not creatures.
Perhaps the luminous objects were not spacecraft.

Perhaps the dream figures were not merely dreams.

Perhaps the apparent anomalies were fragments of a reality that our minds couldn't yet assemble into a coherent picture.

Or perhaps they were unrelated experiences, each with its own ordinary explanation.

I couldn't decide.

And I didn't particularly want to.

Because the uncertainty was part of what made the territory interesting.

The long accommodation might already be underway.

Not as a secret programme directed by an ancient civilisation.

But as a process through which humanity gradually becomes capable of considering forms of intelligence beyond itself.

Other animals.

Artificial intelligence.

Possible extraterrestrial life.

And, within the imaginative world of this book, another branch of humanity.

A population that had taken a different road.

Withdrawn.

Survived.

Developed.

And perhaps become so different that we no longer recognised our own relatives.

I thought about the old Neanderthal bones at Lynford.

The mammoths.

The stone tools.

The evidence of people living in East Anglia tens of thousands of years before our own civilisation existed.

Those people were real.

Their lives were real.

Their experiences mattered to them.

They had relationships.

Children.

Memories.

Fears.

Perhaps dreams.

Perhaps loves that seemed as complete and eternal as the one I'd experienced in my own dream world.

We couldn't know.

But I found it difficult to regard them merely as a vanished species.

They were people.

Other people.

And perhaps the most interesting question wasn't why they disappeared.

But what might have happened if they hadn't.

I imagined one of them standing at the edge of an ancient forest.

Watching a group of Homo sapiens move across the landscape.

The newcomers were noisy.

Energetic.

Curious.

And rather unpredictable.

The Neanderthal observed them for a while.

Then turned away.

There was no immediate danger.

But he had the sense that these people would eventually change everything.

Perhaps he'd already discussed the matter with his companions.

Perhaps they'd begun exploring the caves.

The hidden valleys.

The passages beneath the hills.

Places where their descendants might survive without constant interference.

He looked back once more.

The Homo sapiens were arguing about something.

He couldn't hear the words.

But the tone was unmistakable.

He shook his head.

And returned to his own people.

Tens of thousands of years later, I stood beside an ancient mound in Suffolk.

Thinking about those vanished relatives.

Wondering whether they'd truly disappeared.

Or whether some alternative history might have unfolded beyond our knowledge.

Perhaps they were watching me.

Perhaps they were amused.

Perhaps they'd been watching all along.

And perhaps, somewhere beneath the landscape, an elderly Neanderthal was discussing the situation with his companions.

“That fellow’s still looking for us.”

“Has he found anything?”

“Not really.”

“Does he believe we exist?”

“Sometimes.”

“And the rest of the time?”

“He thinks he’s making it all up.”

“Interesting.”

“Should we contact him?”

The old Neanderthal considered the question.

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“He’s having such a good time.”

I smiled.

The landscape was quiet.

The trees stood motionless.

The ancient mound remained exactly where it had been for thousands of years.

Nothing unusual happened.

No lights appeared.

No strange creatures emerged.

No mysterious voice spoke from the undergrowth.

And that was perfectly satisfactory.

I got back into the car.

There was somewhere else I wanted to visit.

Another stretch of forest.

Another old track.

Another place where the familiar world might briefly become unfamiliar.

Perhaps I'd see something.

Perhaps I wouldn't.

Either way, I intended to keep looking.

Because the people beneath England, whether real or imagined, had given me a reason to examine the country more closely.

And the country itself had become the adventure.

End of Chapter Eight

CHAPTER NINE: THE LAST JOURNEY INTO THE FOREST

The Middle Marches — neither here nor there

There's a song by Jeff Beck called Hi Ho Silver Lining.

Released in 1967.

Jeff Beck was a virtuoso guitarist, one of the great figures of British rock music. But this particular record was an unapologetic attempt at commercial success.

And it worked.

It's a cheerful, slightly ridiculous pop song. The sort of thing people sing at parties after a few drinks.

But the opening contains two lines that have always struck me as rather more interesting than the song's reputation might suggest.

“You're everywhere and nowhere, baby, that's
where you're at.”

There you have it.

The entire mystery of existence explained in a 1960s pop record.

A Zen koan.

Delivered by one of Britain's greatest guitarists while attempting to get into the charts.

Perhaps the ancient sages had been making things unnecessarily complicated.

I remember the song from the seventies.

By then my family had moved from Buckinghamshire to Ravensthorpe in Northamptonshire.

I attended Guilsborough School.

Well, attended might be putting it rather generously.

I wasn't an especially enthusiastic schoolboy.

Not because I disliked learning.

Quite the opposite.

I wanted to learn things.

And I increasingly found that school wasn't the place to do it.

At home I could read Philip K. Dick.

Science fiction.

History.

Occult literature.

Philosophy.

Anything that caught my attention.

I could follow an idea wherever it led.

At school, I was expected to follow a timetable.

An unfortunate arrangement.

Hi Ho Silver Lining was still remembered by the pupils.

And the lyrics had acquired a local variation.

The original reference to a bumpy hillside had become a Buckby hillside.

Long Buckby was a village not far from Guilsborough, and children from there attended the school.

So naturally the song was adapted.

A small example of folklore in action.

A commercial recording enters the popular imagination.

People remember it.

Change the words.

Introduce local references.

And pass the altered version around.

Nobody needs to organise the process.

Nobody establishes an official committee for the preservation of Jeff Beck's lyrics.

The thing simply happens.

And before long, a song written for the national charts has become part of the local culture.

I liked that.

It was precisely the sort of process that might have transformed ancient encounters into folklore.

A strange event occurs.

Somebody tells a story.

The story travels.

The details change.

And eventually it becomes something that belongs to the landscape.

But it was those opening words that interested me now.

Everywhere and nowhere.

How can something be both?

In ordinary logic, the proposition seems contradictory.
Something is either in a place or it isn't.
But human experience isn't always so accommodating.
A memory can be nowhere in the external world.
Yet present wherever you go.
A person can be absent.
Yet occupy your thoughts so completely that they seem to accompany you.
A dream can take place in a landscape that doesn't physically exist.
Yet leave you with the impression that you've been somewhere.
And an idea can transform the way you experience a real location without changing a single physical feature.
Perhaps everywhere and nowhere wasn't such a ridiculous proposition after all.
Perhaps it described a territory I'd been exploring for most of my life.
The Middle Marches.
The place between places.
Neither here nor there.
The word marches originally referred to borderlands.
Territories lying between different jurisdictions.
Places where authority was uncertain.
Where cultures met.
Where one set of customs gave way to another.
The Welsh Marches are the obvious historical example.

But I liked the idea of an entirely different kind of borderland.

A region between ordinary experience and the imaginal.

Between the known landscape and the one suggested by dreams, folklore and anomalous encounters.

Not necessarily another physical country.

Perhaps not a country at all.

More a condition.

A state of attention.

A way of entering the world without insisting that everything immediately conform to familiar categories.

And perhaps the forests of East Anglia were particularly suitable places in which to explore it.

There are stretches of woodland around Croxton where you can walk for considerable distances without encountering another person.

Wyrley's Belt.

The tracks extending towards the A1075.

The broad wooded country associated with the military training land.

Places where the trees seem to continue indefinitely.

Of course, they don't.

There are roads.

Fences.

Managed plantations.

Military boundaries.

Forestry operations.

The landscape is not untouched wilderness.

Far from it.

But once you're away from the roads, and the sound of traffic begins to fade, something changes.

The ordinary human world becomes less immediate.

You begin noticing other things.

The movement of branches.

The texture of the ground.

The sounds of birds.

The occasional animal disappearing through the undergrowth.

The silence between sounds.

And, sometimes, the curious impression that you're not entirely alone.

I've encountered strange arrangements of branches and sticks in these woods.

Structures.

Sculptures, almost.

Lengths of wood leaning against one another.

Branches positioned at peculiar angles.

Occasionally something with an unexpected symmetry.

A construction that looks almost deliberate.

Not quite natural.

But not obviously human either.

There are plenty of ordinary explanations.

Forestry workers.

Walkers.

Children.

People making shelters.

Branches falling and becoming lodged against other trees.

The woodland itself is continually producing arrangements that can appear purposeful.

And human beings are exceptionally good at recognising patterns.

Sometimes where no deliberate pattern exists.

Nevertheless, some of the structures have made me stop.

Look.

Walk around them.

Examine the arrangement.

And wonder.

The curious thing is the feeling they sometimes produce.

A mild unease.

Not necessarily fear.

More a sense that the landscape has changed its character.

A moment earlier, you were walking through an ordinary wood.

Now you're standing before something that resembles a construction.

And you don't know who made it.

Or why.

Suddenly the possibility of another presence becomes vivid.

Perhaps somebody has been here.

Perhaps somebody is still nearby.

Perhaps the structure marks a place.

Or communicates something.

Or perhaps it's simply a pile of branches.

But the uncertainty alters your experience.

The forest is no longer merely scenery.

It has become inhabited.

There have been reports of strange hominid-like creatures in parts of the Croxton woodland.

The popular term is UK Bigfoot.

An unfortunate expression, perhaps.

It imports an American legend into a landscape with its own rich traditions of wild men, woodwoses and strange forest inhabitants.

But the reports are interesting.

People describe unusual figures.

Large shapes.

Movement among trees.

Occasional impressions of being watched.

And sometimes these curious arrangements of branches.

The accounts vary enormously in quality.

Some are second-hand.

Some may involve misidentification.

Others are difficult to assess because the witnesses provide little verifiable information.

There's no established evidence for a surviving population of unknown large hominids in the British countryside.

But the stories themselves are worth noticing.

They reveal something about how people experience remote places.

And perhaps, occasionally, they preserve accounts of events that genuinely puzzled the witnesses.

Within my imaginary Hyperborean model, the explanation was obvious.

The Neanderthals.

Who else?

Perhaps some of them occasionally emerged from their underground settlements.

Perhaps they maintained old routes through the woodland.

Perhaps the branch structures were markers.

Or temporary shelters.

Or something whose purpose I couldn't begin to understand.

And perhaps they were amused by the modern fascination with Bigfoot.

A perfectly respectable branch of humanity, possessing a civilisation tens of thousands of years older than ours, reduced to the status of a hairy monster in popular folklore.

One can imagine the irritation.

"We've developed a different understanding of consciousness."

"Yes."

"And advanced technologies."

"Indeed."

"And maintained a sustainable civilisation for millennia."

"Quite."

"And what do the surface people call us?"

"Bigfoot."

"Disgraceful."

But there was another possibility.
Perhaps the forest itself was the important thing.
Not as a physical hiding place.
But as a psychological environment.
A place where the usual habits of attention begin to loosen.
Where the absence of constant human activity allows unfamiliar impressions to emerge.
Where imagination and perception become more closely entangled.
The old stories understood this.
Fairy encounters frequently occurred away from ordinary settlements.
In forests.
On lonely hills.
Beside ancient mounds.
At crossroads.
Near water.
At twilight.
Places and times associated with transitions.
The margins of the familiar world.
The Middle Marches.
There was a warning in many of those stories.
Don't wander too far.
Don't follow the strange music.
Don't accept food from unfamiliar beings.
Don't enter the mound.

Don't remain in the fairy country longer than necessary.

And above all, don't assume that time passes there as it does here.

A traveller might spend what seemed like a few hours among the fairies.

Then return home to discover that years had passed.

Or centuries.

Everybody he knew was dead.

The village had changed.

The familiar world had disappeared.

It was a terrible prospect.

Although perhaps not quite so terrible if one had few attachments to the ordinary world.

If you were tired of modern civilisation, the fairy country might possess considerable appeal.

No traffic.

No utility bills.

No endless demands to update your passwords.

Although I suspect the fairies would have their own administrative difficulties.

The legends contain a recurring tension.

The otherworld is attractive.

Beautiful.

Extraordinary.

Sometimes offering experiences beyond anything available in ordinary life.

But entering it may involve losing your place in the human world.

You cannot necessarily have both.

And that made the stories more interesting than simple warnings against supernatural danger.

They concerned belonging.

Identity.

The cost of crossing boundaries.

The possibility that a person might discover another world and no longer feel entirely at home in this one.

Perhaps the Neanderthals had faced a similar decision.

Tens of thousands of years ago.

As Homo sapiens expanded across Europe.

As the familiar territories changed.

As the newcomers became increasingly numerous.

Perhaps some of the older population had chosen to withdraw.

Not because they were defeated in some great final battle.

But because they no longer wished to participate in the world that was emerging.

They crossed a boundary.

Entered the hidden places.

And gradually became the people of the mounds.

The people of the forests.

The people beneath England.

Eventually, the surface population forgot that they had ever been human.

They became spirits.

Fairies.

Goblins.

Wild men.

Monsters.

And perhaps, in modern times, extraterrestrials.

The names changed.

The encounters continued.

Or so the story went.

I thought about Charles Fort.

One of the great collectors of anomalies.

Fort assembled curious reports from newspapers, scientific journals and other publications.

Strange falls from the sky.

Unusual lights.

Mysterious disappearances.

Bizarre natural phenomena.

Events that appeared to resist conventional explanation.

His books were unlike ordinary scientific works.

They were literature.

Dense.

Playful.

Provocative.

Full of digressions and strange associations.

At times, reading Fort is rather like entering a vast literary labyrinth.

James Joyce comes to mind.

Not because the two writers were doing precisely the same thing.

But because Fort seemed to delight in language, ambiguity and the disruption of ordinary expectations.

He didn't simply catalogue anomalies.

He used them to challenge the confidence with which human beings described reality.

Fort's famous suggestion that we might be property was particularly unsettling.

He imagined the possibility that humanity occupied a subordinate position within some larger arrangement.

That another intelligence might regard us as possessions.

Or livestock.

Or inhabitants of a managed territory.

It was a deliberately provocative idea.

And perhaps not one that Fort expected his readers to accept literally.

But it reversed the usual assumption.

We imagine ourselves as the principal intelligence on Earth.

The owners.

The observers.

The people who classify everything else.

What if that assumption were wrong?

What if we were being observed?

What if our civilisation occupied only a small part of a much larger system?

What if another population had been watching us for thousands of years?

My imaginary Neanderthals weren't necessarily farmers of humanity.

I didn't particularly like that idea.
It introduced an unnecessary hierarchy.
Another superior race.
Another population claiming the right to control others.
Precisely the sort of thinking that had made Homo sapiens so troublesome in the first place.
I preferred to imagine the hidden people as reluctant neighbours.
People who'd chosen a different way of living.
Who occasionally intervened.
Who sometimes allowed themselves to be seen.
But who generally preferred to remain undisturbed.
Perhaps they regarded us with curiosity.
Perhaps with affection.
Perhaps with exasperation.
Probably all three.
There was another story that had stayed with me.
It came from my father.
He was driving through Norfolk towards London.
This would have been years ago.
The roads were different then.
Country lanes.
Older routes.
Fewer modern improvements.
He may have been driving an Austin.
Or perhaps an American Buick.

I can't remember which.
But the incident itself resisted easy explanation.
He was travelling along an ordinary road.
Then suddenly he saw a train crossing directly ahead.
He slammed on the brakes.
There was no railway line.
At least, none that belonged to the road he thought he was travelling.
And the surrounding landscape had changed.
He was somewhere unfamiliar.
Somewhere that seemed to belong to another place.
Or another time.
The train passed.
And then, somehow, he was back.
The ordinary road.
The familiar landscape.
The journey continuing.
I wish I'd questioned him more closely.
Where exactly had it happened?
What did the train look like?
Were there railway gates?
Buildings?
Other vehicles?
How long did the experience last?
Did he stop afterwards?
Did he return to the location?

These are the questions I'd ask now.

But at the time, it was simply another of my father's stories.

An odd experience recounted without any great fuss.

Something strange had happened.

He remembered it.

And life continued.

There may have been an ordinary explanation.

A moment of disorientation.

An unfamiliar level crossing.

A memory altered by the passage of time.

A brief perceptual disturbance.

Perhaps some combination of circumstances that made the scene appear impossible.

I couldn't establish what had happened.

But the story possessed the peculiar quality I'd encountered in other anomalous accounts.

A familiar journey.

A sudden interruption.

An apparently impossible scene.

Then a return to ordinary reality.

Almost as though two different versions of the landscape had briefly overlapped.

Philip K. Dick would have enjoyed that.

A train crossing a road where no railway existed.

A momentary intrusion from another history.

An alternative version of Norfolk.

Perhaps one in which the railway had been built along a different route.

Perhaps one in which the surrounding countryside had developed differently.

Or perhaps simply a glimpse of an older landscape that had somehow persisted beyond its time.

Again, these were imaginative possibilities.

Not explanations.

But they made the story interesting.

And they suggested that the Middle Marches might not be confined to forests and ancient mounds.

Perhaps they could appear anywhere.

Even on an ordinary road.

In daylight.

While somebody was driving to London.

Another curious connection came through Trevor James Constable.

Trevor was a friend of mine.

An engineer and military historian.

And a man with distinctly unconventional interests.

He was particularly known for his investigations into UFOs.

But his interpretation differed radically from the familiar extraterrestrial spacecraft hypothesis.

Trevor considered that at least some UFOs might be living entities.

Organisms.

Perhaps associated with the controversial idea of orgone energy developed by Wilhelm Reich.

Trevor's theories were speculative and never became accepted scientific explanations.

But he approached the subject with considerable enthusiasm.

And he possessed a remarkable collection of interests.

One of those interests was the Long Range Desert Group.

The famous British reconnaissance and raiding unit operating in North Africa during the Second World War.

The group was founded by Ralph Bagnold.

A singular figure.

Explorer.

Soldier.

Scientist.

A man who'd travelled extensively through the Libyan Desert before the war.

Bagnold had developed a deep understanding of desert travel.

Vehicles.

Navigation.

Sand.

The behaviour of dunes.

His scientific work on wind-blown sand became foundational in the field.

He wasn't some romantic adventurer making extravagant claims about hidden civilisations.

He was a serious investigator.

A practical man.

And that made what Trevor told me particularly interesting.

Trevor had met Bagnold in England.

They'd discussed his desert experiences.

And according to Trevor, Bagnold had encountered some very strange things during his explorations.

Things he didn't generally discuss.

"Rum stuff," as one might put it.

Trevor believed that some of these experiences involved what we'd now call other dimensions.

Or portals.

Places where the familiar world seemed to behave in unfamiliar ways.

I can't independently verify what Bagnold actually said.

The account came to me through Trevor.

And Trevor possessed his own strong interests in unconventional phenomena.

So I wouldn't present the story as established historical evidence.

But it fascinated me.

Here was a man who'd explored some of the most remote desert landscapes on Earth.

A man whose observations contributed to serious science.

And, according to somebody who knew him, he'd encountered things that didn't fit comfortably into his published work.

There was another connection.

My father had served under General Archibald Wavell's command.

Wavell had taken an interest in him.

And Wavell was closely associated with the British military campaigns in North Africa.

So the names formed a curious network.

My father.

Wavell.

Bagnold.

Trevor Constable.

The Long Range Desert Group.

And, somewhere among these perfectly respectable military and historical connections, stories of unsettling experiences.

Other dimensions.

Strange landscapes.

Unfamiliar phenomena.

The sort of things that rarely appear in official histories.

I found that interesting.

Not because military men possess special access to supernatural truth.

They don't.

But because people who spend long periods in remote environments sometimes encounter situations that challenge their expectations.

And because many of those experiences never become part of the public record.

The desert and the forest might seem entirely different environments.

One open.

The other enclosed.

One dominated by vast horizons.

The other by trees and undergrowth.

But psychologically they possess similarities.

Both can remove a person from the ordinary social world.
Both can disrupt familiar patterns of perception.
Both can produce disorientation.
Both contain regions where human presence is limited.
And both have accumulated traditions of strange encounters.
Desert spirits.
Forest beings.
Mirages.
Apparitions.
Lost travellers.
Places where the ordinary world appears to give way to something else.
The Middle Marches.
Perhaps they weren't a particular location.
Perhaps they were what happened when human consciousness entered a landscape without the usual supports.
I returned to the question of the hidden Neanderthals.
What if they'd learned to inhabit precisely these margins?
Not simply caves.
Not merely subterranean chambers.
But places where ordinary human perception became less reliable.
Regions where the boundaries between the familiar and unfamiliar were unusually thin.
Perhaps their technology allowed them to move through environments we couldn't readily perceive.
Perhaps they occupied physical locations that our instruments

had yet to identify.

Or perhaps the entire idea was wrong.

Perhaps the Neanderthals were gone, as the archaeological evidence indicates.

And the experiences I'd been collecting belonged to an entirely different set of questions.

That was possible.

Indeed, considerably more probable.

But the imaginary civilisation had become useful.

It gave the anomalies a common setting.

A mythology.

A way of thinking about other forms of intelligence without immediately sending them across the galaxy.

I imagined meeting one of the hidden people.

Not a monster.

Not a hairy giant.

Not a luminous being.

Just somebody.

Perhaps a man.

Perhaps a woman.

Somebody whose appearance was sufficiently ordinary that I might not immediately recognise anything unusual.

We might meet beside a forest track.

Or near an ancient mound.

Perhaps we'd begin talking about the landscape.

The old maps.

The archaeology.

The strange stories.

And only gradually would I realise that the person knew rather more than an ordinary antiquarian.

Perhaps they'd mention an event that occurred twenty thousand years ago.

Not as something they'd read about.

But as a family memory.

Perhaps they'd describe places that no longer existed above ground.

Old rivers.

Vanished forests.

Landscapes submerged beneath the North Sea.

Perhaps they'd know the names of people who lived at Lynford.

Not the names assigned by archaeologists.

Their actual names.

The people who made the stone tools.

Who lived among the mammoths.

Who raised children.

Who argued.

Who laughed.

Who dreamed.

What would I ask?

That was the difficulty.

There would be so many questions.

What happened when Homo sapiens arrived?

Why did your people withdraw?

How did you survive?

What became of the mixed families?

What do you think of us?

What do you know about consciousness?

About dreams?

About the strange creatures?

About the objects in the sky?

And, perhaps most importantly, why have you remained hidden?

I imagined the visitor listening patiently.

Then smiling.

“You do ask a lot of questions.”

“Yes.”

“Have you considered simply observing?”

“Frequently.”

“And?”

“I usually end up asking more questions.”

“That is unfortunate.”

Perhaps the hidden people would find my entire investigation amusing.

A surface human wandering around East Anglia.

Examining mounds.

Listening for strange cries.

Watching the sky.

Recording videos.

Constructing elaborate hypotheses about Neanderthals.

And occasionally stopping for coffee.
Perhaps they'd watched me for years.
Perhaps they'd occasionally arranged a little demonstration.
A strange animal.
A luminous object.
Two deer standing upon an ancient mound.
Just enough to keep the investigation moving.
Not enough to establish anything.
And perhaps that was deliberate.
A kind of education.
Not through answers.
But through uncertainty.
I thought about Mr Guinn.
The headmaster at Stewkley.
The stories he'd read aloud.
The folklore he'd introduced us to.
The church across the road.
The idea of walking around it nine times.
The telegraph pole.
Widdershins.
The strange creature behind the school fence.
The orange objects above Buckinghamshire.
And the young boy who'd begun to suspect that the world contained more than the adults generally admitted.
Perhaps the entire journey had begun there.
Not with Neanderthals.

Not with UFOs.

Not with the strange experiences in East Anglia.

But with the discovery that the imagination could transform an ordinary landscape.

That a village could become a magical country.

That a telegraph pole could become an axis.

That a school playground could border another world.

And that the old stories might possess meanings beyond their literal content.

I was no longer that boy.

A great deal had happened.

Books.

Music.

Travel.

Relationships.

Children.

Work.

All the ordinary complications of a human life.

But the underlying curiosity remained.

The sense that reality was unfinished.

That our explanations were provisional.

That the world might occasionally reveal something unexpected.

And that the appropriate response wasn't necessarily fear.

Or belief.

Or dismissal.

Sometimes it was simply attention.
I returned to the forests near Croxton.
Not necessarily on any particular date.
Perhaps this was a composite of many visits.
The same roads.
The same tracks.
The same familiar places.
A lay-by.
A woodland entrance.
The military boundary.
The ancient mounds.
The trees extending into the distance.
I parked the car.
Switched off the engine.
And sat for a while.
The silence was pleasant.
There was no particular reason to hurry.
I wasn't expecting anything out of the ordinary.
No UFOs.
No mysterious animals.
No Neanderthal delegation emerging from the undergrowth.
I simply wanted to walk.
Eventually I got out.
The air was cool.
The trees stood quietly around the track.

Somewhere in the distance, a bird called.
I began walking.
The ground was uneven.
Branches lay across parts of the path.
There were occasional openings where the light reached the forest floor.
And darker stretches where the trees grew closer together.
Nothing unusual.
Nothing supernatural.
Just woodland.
But I was aware of the familiar change.
The gradual withdrawal from ordinary human concerns.
The sense that the landscape was becoming more immediate.
More complete.
The mind beginning to settle.
The usual internal commentary becoming less insistent.
I wasn't trying to produce an altered state.
I was simply walking.
And paying attention.
I came upon an arrangement of branches.
Nothing especially elaborate.
A few lengths of wood leaning against one another.
A shape that might have been deliberate.
Or entirely accidental.
I stopped.
Looked.

Walked around it.

There was no obvious explanation.

But no compelling reason to suppose anything beyond the ordinary either.

Perhaps a walker had constructed it.

Perhaps somebody had been making a shelter.

Perhaps the wind had arranged the branches.

I couldn't tell.

And I didn't need to.

For a moment, I experienced that familiar sensation.

The feeling that the forest was inhabited.

That something might be watching.

Not necessarily threatening.

Not necessarily friendly.

Simply present.

I looked around.

The trees remained still.

Nothing moved.

No figure appeared.

No strange sound came from the undergrowth.

And I found myself smiling.

Perhaps this was the Middle Marches.

Not a supernatural territory.

Not a hidden country.

But the point at which ordinary perception begins to admit the possibility of something else.

A place between certainty and imagination.
Between the known and unknown.
Between the world we inhabit and the world we suspect might
exist.
Neither here nor there.
I thought again about the Neanderthals.
The real people who'd inhabited Europe for hundreds of thou-
sands of years.
Who'd lived through immense climatic changes.
Who'd made tools.
Raised children.
Buried some of their dead.
And eventually disappeared as a distinct population.
Their genetic inheritance survived.
Their physical remains survived.
Their tools survived.
But their stories were lost.
We didn't know what they called themselves.
What they believed.
What they dreamed.
What they feared.
What they loved.
Perhaps they'd possessed myths about other worlds.
Perhaps they'd told stories about strange beings in the forests.
Perhaps they'd wondered whether they were alone.
And perhaps, if one of them could have stood beside me in the

Suffolk woodland, we'd have recognised something in one another.

Not necessarily through language.

Perhaps through curiosity.

The simple desire to understand the world.

I realised that I didn't particularly need the Neanderthals to have survived.

Not in order for the journey to matter.

The real Neanderthals were extraordinary enough.

The forests needed no embellishment.

The ancient mounds.

The old stories.

The animals.

The strange experiences.

The peculiar encounters with other people.

All of it.

The hidden civilisation was an imaginative construction.

A way of bringing these things together.

A story.

And stories possess their own power.

They alter attention.

They encourage exploration.

They create connections.

Sometimes they reveal genuine patterns.

Sometimes they simply make the world more interesting.

And perhaps that was sufficient.

I continued walking.
The forest grew quieter.
The track curved away between the trees.
I couldn't see very far ahead.
For a moment I wondered what might be waiting beyond the bend.
A deer?
A walker?
An unusual arrangement of branches?
Perhaps nothing at all.
I remembered Jeff Beck.
Everywhere and nowhere.
The words had followed me from the sixties through the seventies and into the present.
A ridiculous pop song.
And a rather good description of the territory I'd been exploring.
The Middle Marches.
A place that might not exist on any map.
But which could be entered almost anywhere.
At a bus stop.
Beside a church.
In a dream.
On a lonely road.
In a desert.
Or in the forests of East Anglia.

I stopped once more.

Listened.

There was no sound beyond the ordinary movements of the woodland.

And then I had a peculiar thought.

Perhaps the people beneath England weren't waiting for us to discover them.

Perhaps they were waiting for us to discover something about ourselves.

That we weren't the centre of everything.

That intelligence could take unfamiliar forms.

That consciousness remained mysterious.

That our civilisation was only one possible arrangement of human life.

And that the world didn't necessarily become less interesting when we abandoned the need to explain everything.

Perhaps the hidden people understood that.

Perhaps they'd understood it for tens of thousands of years.

Or perhaps I'd simply invented them to remind myself.

Either way, it seemed a worthwhile lesson.

I turned back towards the car.

There was still plenty of daylight.

I could have continued deeper into the forest.

Perhaps followed another track.

Perhaps investigated another mound.

But I was content.

I'd come looking for nothing in particular.

And found precisely that.

Which, in the Middle Marches, might be considered a successful expedition.

Somewhere among the trees, a branch cracked.

I stopped.

Looked back.

Nothing.

Perhaps a deer.

Perhaps a falling branch.

Perhaps an animal moving through the undergrowth.

I waited a moment.

Then smiled.

“All right,” I said quietly.

“Keep your secrets.”

And continued towards the road.

I imagined an elderly Neanderthal standing somewhere beyond the trees.

Watching me depart.

Perhaps he’d been there all along.

Perhaps he’d listened to my thoughts.

Perhaps he’d found the entire business rather amusing.

He turned to a companion.

“Well?”

“Did he find us?”

“No.”

“Disappointed?”

“Not particularly.”

“Will he come back?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

The old Neanderthal considered the question.

“Because he likes the forest.”

His companion nodded.

“Fair enough.”

And the two of them disappeared into Hyperborea.

I reached the car.

Opened the door.

Sat down.

For a while I looked out at the trees.

Then I started the engine.

There were ordinary things to do.

Messages to answer.

Food to buy.

Perhaps something to write.

The world of Homo sapiens awaited.

With all its complications.

Its absurdities.

Its occasional kindness.

And its possibilities.

I drove away.

The forest remained behind.

Quiet.

Ancient.

Entirely itself.

And perhaps, somewhere within it, another world continued.

Neither here nor there.

Everywhere and nowhere.

I don't know whether the Neanderthals survived.

I don't know what the strange creatures were.

I don't know what caused the unusual lights.

I don't know whether the old stories preserve memories of encounters with another population.

And I don't know whether Hyperborea exists anywhere beyond the imagination.

But I do know this.

The world is considerably stranger than our habitual descriptions of it.

And the most interesting journeys don't necessarily take us to distant places.

Sometimes they begin when we stop.

Look.

Listen.

And allow the familiar world to become unfamiliar again.

Perhaps that's where the real adventure starts.

Not with the discovery of another civilisation.

But with the recognition that we've never entirely understood our own.

And somewhere in the Middle Marches, perhaps, an old

Neanderthal is still laughing.

Not at us.

With us.

Or at least, he would be.

If only we'd learn to laugh at ourselves.

THE END

The Invisible College

Books encountered along the way, and others whose influence can be felt in the background.

Travellers, Observers and Investigators

- H. V. Morton — *In Search of England* (1927)
- H. V. Morton — *In the Land of the Vikings* (1928)
- Charles Fort — *The Book of the Damned* (1919)
- Jacques Vallée — *Passport to Magonia* (1969)
- Jacques Vallée — *The Invisible College* (1975)
- John A. Keel — *UFOs: Operation Trojan Horse* (1970)

Prehistoric People and Lost Worlds

- Edward Bulwer-Lytton — *The Coming Race* (1871)
- Arthur Conan Doyle — *The Lost World* (1912)
- Edgar Rice Burroughs — *At the Earth's Core* (1914)
- Robert E. Howard — *The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian* (2003; collection of earlier stories)
- Clark Ashton Smith — *The Book of Hyperborea* (1996; collection of earlier stories)

Folklore, Dreams and Other Realities

- Arthur Machen — *The Great God Pan* (1894)
- Arthur Machen — *The White People* (1904)
- J. W. Dunne — *An Experiment with Time* (1927)
- Philip K. Dick — *VALIS* (1981)
- Christina Rossetti — *Goblin Market* (1862)
- Henry Gilbert — *Robin Hood and the Men of the Greenwood* (1912)

These are not offered as evidence for a hidden civilisation beneath England. They are part of the imaginative and intellectual company in which the book was written.

Some are works of investigation. Others are fiction, poetry, folklore or speculative philosophy.

All, in their different ways, ask whether the world is quite what it appears to be.

About the Author

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Sharing

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