

WITCHES ON THE EDGE

Alistair Clay Egerton

Alderley Edge, a Cheshire beauty spot, rises from the Lancashire/Cheshire plain like a stranded whale on a flat beach or a wedge of cheese on a plate. It is fourteen miles from the centre of Manchester and six miles from Macclesfield. The hill rises swiftly and steeply above Alderley Edge village to a height of about three hundred feet above sea level. Then it slopes gently towards Macclesfield and the Derbyshire Pennines. The early name of the village was, according to old records, Aldredsley. It was from this name that the title of the magical order, the Wardensi Aldredsley was derived.

These Wardens of Aldersley have no connection with the modern wardens of the National Trust who now administer the area, since it was given to them by the Misses Pilkington, whose family had it from Lord Stanley of Aldersley. The Trust have caused some changes to the character of the area by their planting of serried ranks of conifers in plantations, and by having allowed the Macclesfield Council's cleansing department to tip rubbish into old mine shafts and opencast workings; one of which was probably a Neolithic site similar to that at Engine Vein Mine. So much for the environment and our industrial heritage.

It is not only Stonehenge which has suffered from the attentions of our do-gooders. But the Trust are not the only ones to blame however. Local farmers ploughed up six earth circles of varying dimensions in the area, removing yet more traces of the importance to which this ancient site seems to have had to our ancient ancestors who may well, on the Engine Vein site, have mined the green malachite deposits, and perchance also utilised the small, blue azurite nodules, which are to be found after heavy rainfall.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, and the introduction of steam transport and more easy methods of transport, Alderley was, to some extent, cut off from the hurly-burly of cities and towns. In those times, it is reported, a strange race of people lived in the scrubland which, after its initial planting, became the woods of Alderley Edge. Similar people are also said to have lived on the poor quality, and at that time, boggy land of Lindow Moss, near Wilmslow. The use in a place name of the suffix 'Low' indicates a prehistoric burial ground and indeed it was from Lindow Moss that archeologists recovered the well preserved body of a possibly sacrificed Iron Age man, who was named by them 'Pete Moss.'

The reports of these people are that they were 'slow and heavy of movement, with coarse, heavy features, and dull, grey, leaden coloured skin. They apparently shunned the company of others not of their kind, except for the sale of items which they skilfully made, such as woven baskets, snares and small wooden items. When they fought they fought like wild animals, using not balled fists, but their teeth, feet and nails of their fingers.' These people seem to have disappeared without trace since the region was opened up to more general habitation. In his excellent children's book, later adapted for radio, *The Weirdestone of Brisangamen*, Alan Garner, who was born and lived in the area, suggests the dwarves and trolls inhabiting the area were decimated and driven into living on a different plane by the atmospheric pollution engendered by industrial man. He may well have a point.

His book is based on the Arthurian linked legend of the 'Iron Gates' and the Wizard of Alderley. The legend of the Wizard lingers on and has been joined by some more recent legends of the Wizard's Well and the Night Demons of the woods. As to the 'Night Demons' I have an explanation. This minor legend commenced only about half a century ago. It must be borne in mind that there was a World War in progress and congregation of people in semi-remote places was looked upon with suspicion. If reported it was investigated, with full wartime paranoia by the police. In addition, the practice of witchcraft was still illegal. Whether illegal or not, the Wardnesi Aldredsley were not the only occultists to be based at the Edge.

Some of the Order's members also belonged to a pre-Gardnerian coven of witches who had met in the area since prior to the mid-1950s.

During the war one of the coven's members was employed at the AV. Roe aircraft factory in Manchester and had access to off cuts of a clear form of plastic known as perspex which was used for the cockpit screens of aeroplanes. Another member on war work had access to luminous paint. Not the emasculated two layer faeces which is to be obtained today, requiring charging in UV light as if charging a battery, but the excellent, carcinogenic, old fashioned material. The pieces of perspex had eyes painted on both sides with the luminous paint. Triangular slivers of glass, sometimes red glass, were glued to the plastic. Small holes were drilled for thread by which these pieces were hung from the branches on either side of the paths approaching the witches' meeting site in the woods. These objects, at various heights, swayed gently in the night air. On a dark winter's night, even if you knew what they were, the effect was incredible. A torch shone at the eerie green or red eyes reflected back from the glass teeth.

Apart from occultists the only people in the woods at night were courting couples - and they soon found somewhere else to go!

The Wizard's Well is mentioned in the book *Sacred Waters* by Janet and Colin Bord (Granada 1985). They mention the inscription cut in the lichen covered rock above the well as being: 'Drink of this and take thy fill, for the water falls by the Wizard's will.' The water trickles through the vegetation on the rock to fall into a square stone basin, it is true, but if they had looked more carefully they would have seen that in the description the word 'wizard' is spelt is actually spelt 'wishard'. They also ignore in this book the similarly constructed 'Holy Wells' which lie side by side below the not so distant Picnic Rock. The Wishard's Well was reputed to have had the useful property of being able to grant wishes. Presumably if one would wish 'ard! The wisher was supposed to throw a large bent pin into the shallow well while wishing to obtain an efficacious result.

In the 1960s, the enterprising younger son of Sir Robert Egerton, though not exactly short of cash, having become his father's heir on the disinheriting of his elder brother, Alastier Egerton, for his refusal to inform on the members of the coven and the Order, and give up his practice and study of the occult in 1947, changed this idea. He placed neatly printed notices by the well which gave a short account of the legend of the Iron Gates and the Wizard and also said that those wanting a wish should cast a silver coin into the well. In pre-decimalisation terms this meant coins valued at six, twelve, twenty-four and thirty pence. Coins thrown in had a tendency to become obscured by the leaves which fell into the well and sink to the bottom. It is said that there is one born every minute and quite a number of them wished in the well. Collections were made two or three times a day while the notices were in place at weekends and public holidays.

In 1994 I visited Lancaster and while there Lena and Norman of *Lone Wolf* magazine kindly drove me to Alderley Edge for a visit of a couple of hours during other visiting. I showed them the Wizard's Well and Norman found in it a modern five pence piece. It would appear that the custom revised by my brother Cedric to require coin instead of bent pins still has one modern adherent! More astonishing is the fact that when I took them to view the stone circle on the Edge, Norman, whose sight though better than mine is far from perfect, discovered in the undergrowth by the stones a small piece of discoloured perspex. Though it no longer had paint or triangular pieces of glass on it, there is no doubt in my mind it was one of those I have written about in this article.

The 'Druids' Circle', which had nothing to do with the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, was named by archaeologists, but they had no idea how long this pseudo-

stone circle had been there. I suspect that some of the stones have at some time been altered from their original alignment. Tradition has it, or had it, within the coven practising there in the 1940s that the circle was in existence in the 1860s. [The writer Alan Garner has claimed that the face of 'Merlin' carved at the Wizard's Well and the Druids' Circle were the work of his great-great grandfather Robert Garner, who was a stonemason. He apparently carried out the work on behalf of the Stanley and Trafford families around 1840 Ed]

It was at that time in the mid-1800s that the first attempt since the Roman occupation was made to exploit the coniferous deposits in the Triassic limestone which forms the great majority of the Edge. The first real attempt, I should have written, for odd, short-lived sporadic attempts have been made before that time, all ending in costly failure. To assist with these more extensive operations miners were imported from the great Parrys copper mine in Angelsey. These miners were accommodated in a row of cottages on the Edge, near to the site of what became the Great West Mine. The cottages, long destroyed, became known as 'Welsh Row'. Some of these miners were witches, or perchance Welsh wizards, and they were welcomed by and joined the local English witches who used the area. It may have been at this time that the Wizard's Well and the Holy Wells were cut.

Over the decades the Wardensii Aldredsley and the original coven were joined in their use of the area by some of the covens which flourished like weeds following the repeal of the old Witchcraft Act and the popularisation of the Craft by Dr Gerald Gardner. My old occult enemy, when he was a magician of a not very benevolent kind, and later a great friend after he changed his ways and adopted Gerald's methods and formed his own system, Alexander Sanders, made free with the Edge and some of its underground workings. Sometimes, I admit, to my chagrin. Such as when he carved a pentacle on the 'Square Plug in a Round Hole' a Devil's Grave, and when he omitted to lift the 'cloak of invisibility' from the stone circle, causing me to appear to be a fool unable to find such an easily traced landmark.

As the number of occultists using the Edge increased, so the disused mines came into more use for subterranean rites and ceremonies away from the prying eyes of the public. The Wardensii Aldredley had long used the Great Adit in initiation ceremonies, transporting the would-be initiate by boat far into the hill to a small sandy beach at the widening of the passage. There he was left for quite a considerable time alone, before the welcome return of the boat. The Womb Chamber of the CCH Mine was used by the original Aldersley coven. To sleep alone in this chamber was to experience at certain times of the year something similiar to that which has occurred to people sleeping in West Kennet long

barrow near Avebury. Although the 'Iceni Stone' at the entrance to the mine has been used, to my knowledge, for well over fifty years as an altar stone, it was also used as an anvil for the refurbishing of tools by the blacksmith, an old occult occupation, who was in the employment of Mr Abbardine, one of the best known of the owners of the mining rights at the Edge.

John Wilcock in his book *A Guide to Occult Britain* mentions locals in the area of the Edge hearing 'strange underground music'. This is not the case of the music and revels of the faery folk in the Hollow Hill. The hills here are hollow, with the abandoned copper mines, but the music did not originate with the faeries. The Aldersley coven took advantage of the secrecy afforded by the mine workings and, to my knowledge, musically inclined members played instruments at meetings from the 1940s onwards. Indeed I used to take a gramophone, portable although far more cumbersome than a modern tape recorder, down the mines myself. It is surprising how sound can sometimes be clearly heard on the surface from large subterranean chambers which act as amplifiers.

The West and Wood Mines are now inaccessible without permission and their miles of passages and chambers, some huge, are now lost to the use of both witches and magicians, even to many fodinaedogists. They study mines and mines as a specialised branch of industrial archaeology and the use of disused mines, such as these and the Welsh Pare mine, by witches is of legitimate interest to them. Many of the pre-Gardnerian witches who contacted me as a result of my previous articles in TC and other magazines seem to have been quarry and mine workers. I know that my old coven had copper miners in it in the mid-1800s and the Shropshire coven which I knew had workers from a quarry at Wrekin. The Llandudno coven also had quarry workers in it. This had not struck me as significant until I heard of pre-Gardnerian covens near Pennmaenwr in North Wales who had slate quarry workers as members, and one in Scotland who had oil slate miners at the end of the 19th century. I have now heard of two old covens in Derbyshire, one of which had quarrymen as members and another who had lead miners who worked for the London Lead Company. I have checked and the now disused mine was in truth one of those held by the company.

Sadly, Alistair Robert Clay-Egerton, known to his many friends in the occult world simply as 'Bob' passed to the Land of the Summer Stars in January this year after a long illness. He was sixty-eight. As a young boy Bob was initiated into a coven in Cheshire in the 1940s which met on the estate of his parents, Sir Robert and Lady Alice Egerton near Alderley Edge. He also joined the local magical Order of the Wardens of Alderley. Because he refused to give up the occult path, at the age of eighteen he was disinherited by his family. Bob was a

paratrooper in the Army and a Hell's Angel in his earlier days. He was also a keen caver and a founder member of the Derbyshire Cave Rescue organisation. His ashes were scattered at his beloved Alderley Edge and he will be sadly missed by his family, friends and readers of his articles in TC and other publications. M.H.