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Citation for final published version:

Tallis, Lisa Mari 2022. Welsh witchcraft revelations and ruins: the example of Mari Berllan Biter. *Preternature* 11 (1) , 43–62. 10.5325/preternature.11.1.0043

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5325/preternature.11.1.0043>

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WELL, WHAT ABOUT WITCHES AND WIZARDS? WELSH WITCHCRAFT REVELATIONS AND RUINS: THE EXAMPLE OF MARI BERLLAN BITER

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ABSTRACT

The supernatural in Wales, as in many places across the British Isles, is very topographical. Much of its landscape, features, sites, and buildings inspires and attracts the supernatural in equal measure. This article considers this relationship and the issues surrounding the historical and cultural interpretation of the supernatural in Wales through a close examination of a small, ruined cottage in the village of Pennant in Cardiganshire. It was the home of Mary Davies (ca.1817–1898), or Mari Berllan Biter – a reputed witch. This article will reveal how the intricacies of witchcraft beliefs in Wales are revealed through a close analysis of not only the historical evidence surrounding Mari, but also the physical remnants of her ruined cottage, thus highlighting the potential for collaboration between the spheres of history, heritage, and archaeology in understanding the key role of supernatural beliefs on our landscape.

KEYWORDS

witches, Welsh, demonology, cursing, supernatural, witchcraft

To say that Wales is the land of spirit is a bit like saying it is the land of song, or sheep! Nearly every person in Wales can relate at least three tales of ghosts, devils, fairies, or witches from their own experiences or communities. And by “communities” I mean their physical community—for the supernatural in Wales is often deeply rooted in a physical site, such as village, a house, a mountain, a well, a castle, a beach, or a bridge. Wales is hardly unique in that sense. The supernatural is very topographical, and in a country with eight world famous mountain ranges, 1,680 miles of coastline, and too many secluded waterfalls and glacial lakes to count, it is no wonder the landscape and some of its dwellings attract and inspire the supernatural. In this article, I examine some of these key sites. Focusing on a tiny, ruinous cottage on the outskirts of the village of Pennant in Cardiganshire, I explore how these ruins and the ways in which they are remembered, if at all, reveal the

DOI: 10.5325/preternature.11.1.00042

PRETERNATURE, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2022

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intricate dynamics of witchcraft beliefs in Welsh society and the historical as well as cultural representation of those beliefs.

There are some noticeable examples of supernatural sites, towns, and places in Wales. Llanddona, for instance, is a village in Anglesey noted for its beautiful sandy beach, which also happens to be the supposed site of a famous wreck of a ship that carried on board a family of gypsy-witches.¹ According to legend, when the ship first approached the shore, the Welsh tried to drive it back into the sea. When it finally did come ashore, the passengers were confined to the beach. Nearly dead from thirst and hunger, one of them commanded a spring to burst forth from the sands; this wondrous event persuaded the locals to let them stay. Their descendants became known as the “Witches of Llanddona.” The men lived by smuggling, and the women—believed to have inherited the power to bewitch—by begging, cursing, and fortune-telling. The infamous curse of this formidable tribe, the only known example of such a curse in Welsh, has been preserved in the folklore record and remains notable for its intention to cause perpetual suffering throughout the victim’s life rather than immediate harm or death. The vernacular version below, with an English translation, demonstrates the significance of ritualized cursing in Welsh witchcraft and conveys a clear idea of how the words used were not only meant to be literally threatening but also were designed to *sound* threatening and create a sense of fear and anxiety:

*Crwydro y byddo am oesoedd lawer,
Ac ym mhob cam, camfa;
Ym mhob camfa, codwm;
Ym mhob codwm, torri asgwrn;
Nid yr asgwrn mwyaf na’r lleiaf;
Ond asgwrn chwil corn ei wddw bob tro.*

May he wander for ages many;
And at every step, a stile;
At every stile, a fall;
At every fall, a broken bone;
Not the largest, nor the least bone;
But the chief neck bone every time.²

As another example of a supernatural place, Llangurig, a small village on the banks of the River Wye in Montgomeryshire, was famous from the 1860s

through 1940s for its *dynion hysbys* (wise/cunning men). Skilled in fortune-telling, counter-magic, and healing cattle, references to *dyn hysbys Llangurig* (the Llangurig wise-man) appear in various accounts of popular magical practices around this time (Hamer 1870). Most famous of these were Evan Griffiths and Edward Davies.

Several examples of witchcraft charms possibly written by these cunning men have been preserved by St. Fagans National Museum of History, together with several oral and written testimonies that provide some detail as to how and why these charms were obtained. For instance, one such charm was obtained from a “Griffiths,” possibly our Evan Griffiths, by a Richard Lewis. The donor, Mr. Gwyn Lewis, explained that his grandfather, Richard, lived at Henhafod on the way to Nantymoch and worked as a farmer. He seemed to be beset by bad luck, for strangely, whenever it came time for a colt or a calf to be sold, the animal would die suddenly. After obtaining the charm from Griffiths, however, things improved immediately. The *dyn hysbys* informed Lewis’s grandfather that a woman had bewitched them and that she was a relative! Lewis claims that his aunt knew who the woman was and would testify to the fact. All this occurred c. 1870, and the family’s fortunes improved dramatically following their procurement of the charm.³

The historic market town of Denbigh, in Denbighshire, North Wales, on the other hand, was famed for its *dewinesau* (wise-women) during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The most notable of these were Sioned Gorn and Bella the fortune teller—so well-known, in fact, that they warranted a mention in one of Thomas Edwards’s, aka Twm o’r Nant’s, famous interludes, in which the character Rondol was so pleased with the predictions of gypsy-fortune-teller “Aunty Sal o’r South[s]” (Auntie Sal from the South [Wales]) that he exclaimed, “Sian and Sioned, and Rebela of Dinbech, They’re not fit to open their mouth” (Edwards [1787] 1839: 60). The artist Edward Pugh described his encounter with Bella during his tour of North Wales around 1809 and makes reference to her predecessor, Sionett. It is not clear whether she and Bella are the same as those mentioned by the character Rondol, but it is certainly an enticing conclusion since Twm o’r Nant’s interlude was published in 1787, and Bella was evidently an established *dewines* when Pugh met her ca. 1809 (Pugh 1816: 392). Indeed, Pugh’s detailed account of his encounter with Bella, plus the subsequent portrait that he sketched during their encounter and later painted (fig. 1), offers a unique insight into the standing and activities of cunning-women in their communities at this time.⁴



FIG. 1 Watercolor of "Bella the Fortune Teller" painted by Edward Pugh, ca. 1809.
 Courtesy of Cardiff University Special Collections and Archives.

CURSING WELLS

Wales is also known for its holy wells, but there is also a dark side to them. Cursing, as this article has noted, was a key feature of Welsh witchcraft beliefs, but the act often centered on a certain object rather than on the actual words. Ffynnon Elian (St. Elian's Well) in Llanelian-yn-Rhos in Denbigh, is a case in point. It was originally a virtuous well, according to the story: a hermit, who

was also a saint, fell ill near the spot and prayed for water. The well appeared at his side, and upon drinking from it, he was cured. He then prayed that the well would grant those who believed in its power anything they wished, thus ensuring its formidable reputation (Anonymous 1860: 1). Similar traditions were associated with other holy wells in Wales. For example, Ffynnon Cybi (St. Gybi's Well) in Llanybi is famous for its healing powers and its ability to inform maidens of their lovers' faithfulness. Saint Cybi was granted the land to build the church there by Prince Maelgwyn of Gwynedd, who was much impressed by this holy man (Barber 2016: 111). Moreover, the well of Trefriw was so renowned for its healing powers that its virtues are acclaimed in a Welsh ballad, set in the form of a dialogue between a patient and the well. In one verse the patient claims, "I have heard much talk about you, that you heal all who come to you." The well replies that many of the sick have been "completely cured by drinking me for some days" (Jones 1930: n.p.).⁵

Ffynnon Elian, however, gained a reputation as a cursing well at some point during the eighteenth century. A local doctor from Llansantffraid, Mr. Williams, was believed to have magical powers to raise devils, converse with the dead, and uncover hidden mysteries and through the aid of the well, could affect a blessing or a curse as he saw fit (Evans, n.d.: 9). Its notoriety as a cursing well was really at its peak when a certain John Evans took over from a Mrs. Sarah Hughes as keeper of the well in the early nineteenth century. The exact date is uncertain, but the *Cambrian*, the first weekly newspaper published in Wales, in April 1819 reports a "John Edwards" appearing before the Great Sessions in Flintshire and being sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment for obtaining 14 shillings 6 pence by false pretenses from Edward Pierce, who believed that if his name was written and placed in the well then "he could not thrive in body or estate till the name was taken out" and consequently paid the keeper of the well to do so. John Evans was imprisoned in 1854, and according to his own testimony around this time, he had been keeper of the well for about 35 years, suggesting that he was indeed operating in, or around 1819, possibly after the imprisonment of John Edwards.⁶

We are fortunate with Ffynnon Elian to have a considerable amount of written evidence, in particular the contemporary accounts of John Evans and his time as keeper of the well, and other supporting material—Pugh also mentions the well when describing his consultation with Bella, for example—that gives us a detailed insight into the magical and practical dynamics surrounding the operation of a Welsh cursing well. Evans's association with the well occurred quite by accident. Evans explained that he went to live by the well and was mistaken

for its keeper by a man who then paid Evans money and went home “believing that all was ok.” Evans did not say what the man paid him for, but presumably it was for the removal of his name from the well.

The act of placing a curse on someone involved writing the victim’s name on a piece of parchment or slate, accompanied by passages from the Bible or Apocrypha, and placing it in the well. For a fee, Evans would lift the curse by removing the person’s name from the well. An object of this kind was discovered in Ffynnon Eilian in Anglesey (not to be confused with Ffynnon Eilian in Denbigh), in the 1920s. It consists of a piece of roofing slate, about three inches long and two inches wide, with a label marked in the center with the letters “OAM” and “MEM” scratched in the corners. Pinned in the center of this label is a wax figure, with the large initial R. on the left side of the figure and F. on the right. As Neil Baynes observes, we may assume that this was placed in the well “with no benevolent feelings towards ‘R. F.’,” for whom, it appears, the curse was intended (Baynes 1925: 115). When asked what people most commonly requested him to place in the well, Evans replied: “worldly success for themselves or misfortune for others; to hasten their own weddings or hinder the weddings of others; to be blessed in this life and the next, or to curse their enemies,” and “to release themselves in circumstances where they believed that others had placed them [in the well].” Referring to St. Eilian’s main function as a cursing well, Evans then added: “I had more trouble with this kind [of request] than I can say” (Evans, n.d.: 22)

As well as a physical site, then, Ffynnon Eilian has a wealth of written and material evidence to support this “unholy” aspect of its history. And yet, any cultural or heritage promotion and interpretation remains almost as hidden as the well itself. Accessibility is perhaps key. The well, situated on private land, is not on any obvious or popular tourist trail. Furthermore, any serious historical analysis of Ffynnon Eilian’s infamous reputation and activities is just as marginal as the site itself⁷—a situation no doubt familiar to similar sites around the country, none perhaps more fitting than the ruins of a tiny, unassuming cottage in the village of Pennant, Ceredigion, which is the main focus of this article.

BERLLAN BITER: A “WITCH’S” COTTAGE

This small, crumbled cottage in the village of Pennant was the home of Mary Davies (ca. 1817–1898), more commonly known as Mari Berllan Biter, or Pitter (the spelling can vary) (fig. 2). Berllan Biter is the name of the cottage in



FIG. 2 The ruins of Berllan Biter, ca. 2010.
Photo by the author.

question, where Mari lived, set in an orchard: hence the name Berllan, from the Welsh *perllan*, “orchard.” Mari was, by all accounts, a poor woman who lived by begging, dependent on charity. She was also a reputed witch, and locals firmly believed in her ability to do harm. Fortunately, the Sound Archives at St Fagans National Museum of History hold various accounts, recorded in the late 1960s and 1970s, of some of the inhabitants of Pennant and their memories of Mari. The oral testimony of Dan Jones, for example, provides many details of Mari’s activities and the local beliefs surrounding her. He describes how she had a dubious look about her, “with a really long nose . . . and a shawl over her head,” which gave her a witch-like appearance. In addition, she spoke in a certain way, allegedly similar to the ways in which the fairies were believed to communicate, that enhanced her magical reputation. Jones describes how Mari “spoke quietly, [softly] . . . charming in . . . [her] way of speaking.” She sometimes went to chapel, although the minister was wary of acknowledging her presence there, and Mari was careful not to eat the communion bread, which she would leave on the floor by her seat. She would often be held accountable for any misfortune that befell the community. After a housewife had turned Mari away from her door, she went to bed feeling slightly uneasy and was disturbed by a great

noise during the night. When she and her daughters awoke the next morning, they discovered that the chain on the clock had broken. Dafydd Jones, the local farmer, believed that Mari had bewitched his animals: in one year fourteen of his cows aborted, and on another occasion a horse he was due to sell broke its leg a few days before the market. The farmer would often send Mari some flour to keep her happy, and he would be trouble free for a while after.⁸

Welsh author and minister Eirlys Gruffydd also noted similar accounts of Mari's magical exploits received from older members of the community when she visited family in the area during the early 1980s. When "Dic y Felin" (Dic [of] the Mill) refused to mill some flour for her, Mari caused the mill wheel to turn the wrong way. On another occasion Watkin Jones was dragging logs up the hill past Mari's cottage when his mare suddenly lay down and refused to move past the small house. Watkin had to fetch Mari who "spoke to the mare" and touched its head, whereupon the mare got up and continued to pull the load up the hill without a fuss. It was also believed that Mari interfered with the churning process. When the Lluest family of Pennant failed to churn they would send for Mari who would give a "turn or a knock" to the churn, and the butter would come easily (Gruffydd 1984: 12–13).

In many ways, the Mari presented here is the archetypal witch figure so common in Welsh society. Even though Wales escaped the European witch hunts relatively unscathed, witches and practitioners of popular magic maintained a significant supernatural stronghold in Welsh society throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Reverend Elias Griffiths records the tale of an old woman, a "reputed witch" who lived by begging at Ffridd Ucha, Llanfrothen in north Wales ca. 1815, in his prize Eisteddfod essay. After being refused some milk at Ty Mawr farm, the milk subsequently failed to churn, which prompted the farmer to consult a local conjuror in the belief that the old woman had bewitched him. When the conjuror's charm failed to have any long-lasting effect, Griffiths, the farmer, was advised to go to "Bell, or Bella the Denbigh witch." Bella gave the farmer precise instructions as to the layout of his farm and in which field to gather his cattle to draw in the suspected witch. When the cows came together and began bellowing loudly, the suspected woman did indeed appear in the field, in evident pain. Griffiths, who had been instructed by Bella to keep watch under a holly tree, witnessed the woman uttering some "unintelligible" words that calmed the cattle, and then she disappeared. Griffiths had no trouble churning after this incident (Owen 1896: 240). A Pembrokeshire folk tale relates the history of "an old lady called Nansi, who had a reputation as a *gwrach* or witch" (John 1991: 79). In Ystrad Meurig an "old witch" bewitched a sheep and

its lamb. When the farmer refused her request for the lamb she warned “thou wilt soon loose both,” which he did by the end of his journey (Davies 1911: 236). While the witch stereotype was evidently part of folk tradition, other evidence points to the existence of such figures in Welsh society. As Davies argues, they were an “integral element of the human community” (Davies 1999: 192).

On 14 April 1827 the *Cambrian* records the appearance before the Monmouthshire Assizes of William Watkins, a respectable farmer, charged with a riot and assaulting Mary Nicholas, whom he “absurdly fancied” to be a witch. Another local confrontation between a John Roberts (d. 1841) and the reputed witch “Sian Nog” is described in the Welsh periodical *Cymru*. Believing that one of his bulls had been bewitched, he threatened Sian to come and lift her spell. All seemed well when he returned to his farm, though he later confessed that he felt the ground swell beneath his feet as he confronted Sian (Jones 1899). That people continued to believe in witches throughout Mari Berllan Biter’s lifetime and beyond is evident. In 1888, an informant noted in *Bye-Gones* that, “when in the county of Meirioneth, I was informed that an old woman, who was a witch, resided in the parish of Llanbedr” (Ellan 1888: 91). William Bwlchgwyn from Pencader, Carmarthenshire, an area that was especially well stocked with witches, confirmed that he knew of “twenty of them” that lived not five miles away and that they had done harm to many (Beynon 1897: 191). Writing in 1926, L. Winstanley claimed that “witchcraft lives and flourishes at the present day” and that he was informed of “three witches in one village . . . whereof one was recently initiated into the Black art” (Winstanley 1926: 163). Evidently, witchcraft was as much a reality in the nineteenth and early twentieth century as it was in the early modern period, and witches were key elements of the community, as the example of Mari clearly demonstrates.

Demonology is also key here, for Mari Berllan Biter is the only example of a reputed Welsh witch with a clear association with familiars. The various testimonies by those who remember her note how she was often seen to keep snakes. Mr. Daniel Herbert was in his nineties when he regaled Eirlys Gruffydd with his childhood memories of Mari. His family lived on a farm near Berllan Biter and he would often visit Mari with materials or goods for her sent down by his mother. He claims she had a pile of withered leaves in front of the fire that were full of snakes (Gruffydd 1984: 12). Another local, a young boy, remembers seeing Mari with an apron full of snakes. When he told her to put them down, she claimed that they were her children and praised them. On another occasion he saw Mari carrying a load of firewood, and when she threw the wood

on the fire it was riddled with snakes, which, she professed to the young boy, were a “great company” to her.⁹ So Mari is extremely important in understanding the various dynamics of demonology and demonological beliefs in Welsh witchcraft—indeed the role of witchcraft theory in Welsh witchcraft during the early modern period and beyond has warranted even less attention in witchcraft historiography than witchcraft itself (see Morgan and Clark 1976: 31–46). And while it is beyond the scope of this article to examine the characteristics of Welsh demonology, it is worth noting that examples like Mari can often offer as much insight into the complex debates surrounding witchcraft theory as they do to more popular dimensions of witchcraft and related beliefs.

So, too, can the physical remnants of Mari’s life if we pay enough attention. Traditionally, historians are not inclined to analyze the material debris of the past in the same way as we would approach its written, printed, or textual remains. Likewise, archaeology’s empirical and scientific approach may not appear to lend itself easily to the field of history. Nevertheless, significant inroads have been made in recent years into the “important areas of convergence” of both disciplines (Mitchell et al. 2010: 864), magic, witchcraft, and the supernatural being areas of considerable mutual interest with huge potential for collaboration—as the wonderful range of papers published in this issue, based on the symposium “The Supernatural in Place,” demonstrates. Ralph Merrifield is generally regarded as the first scholar to make a case for the proper study of the physical artifacts of magic and for a recognition amongst archaeologists that that such things “occur at all periods” (Merrifield 1987: 193). The continued “active agency” of prehistoric artifacts in nineteenth-century rural Ireland in relation to the Si, or fairies, has been examined by Mary Dowd. These artifacts, and the various monuments associated with the Si, continued to function and pertained, as Dowd argues, to an existing albeit supernatural population (Dowd 2018: 451). Similar elements are at play in relation to Mari’s cottage, as we shall see. The complex and adaptable “biographies” of material evidence are also explored by Houlbrook and Armitage (2015). In this sense, materiality refers not only to the physical and corporeal characteristics of magical artifacts and monuments, but to their materiality—the “significance, importance . . . of the study of magic” (Houlbrook and Armitage 2015: 3). The material expressions of magic and the supernatural deserve academic attention alongside an archaeological perspective, as Brian Hoggard has continually demonstrated with regards to witchcraft and magical beliefs as encapsulated, quite literally in some instances, in their physical, protective, object forms (Hoggard 2019; 2015: 91–105).

Mari's cottage also offers a material memoir to her intricate life both as Mary Davies of Pennant, and as Mari Berllan Biter, witch. The ruins of Berllan Biter can still be seen (see figs. 2 and 3). The cottage had two rooms, each with a fireplace. The only windows were at the front because the house was built against a stone outcrop. Physically, the dwelling is typical of any rural, nineteenth-century cottage now in ruins, and in this sense is a fair reflection of Mari's life, at least what we can piece together from the surviving written evidence. Mari was born ca. 1817 to Mary and John Davies, and the 1841 census records all three living at "Berllan Bitter" with John's occupation noted as "Gardener," possibly at Mynachdy, or Monachty Mansion, as it is known today.¹⁰ Mari's father had apparently passed away before the next census, for Mary is still living with her mother, "an independent widow," and a "son," presumably Mari's brother David Davies, a few years younger than Mari. In 1861 Mari is still living at the cottage with her mother and a nine-year-old servant called Mary Ann Davies, possibly a relative. At this point, it seems that Mari, or the family at least, were not as poor as the folk narrative would suggest. By 1871, at age 50 according to the census, Mari is living alone, occupation "not stated."¹¹



FIG. 3 The ruins of Berllan Biter, with the fireplace just visible, ca. 2010.
Photo by the author.

Perhaps, then, it is around the latter half of the nineteenth century, now living alone and having to survive by her own means, that Mari gained her reputation for witchcraft. This may explain some of the narratives surrounding her, such as why Daniel Herbert was often sent to Mari with goods and supplies as a young boy by his mother, or why the farmer Dafydd Jones regularly sent her flour. It also raises an intriguing question: Was Mari possibly rewarded, financially or with various commodities, for her counter-witchcraft? For instance, when she encouraged Watkin Jones's mare to continue with its load after it came to a standstill outside her cottage; or when she was called to the Lluest farm to "knock" the churns so they could continue to churn the milk? In this case, a reputation for witchcraft would be an advantage for Mari, and those two simple words recorded on the census under occupation—"not stated"—take on a whole other meaning!

Berllan Biter amply reflects Mari and her life and role within the community. Like her cottage, Mari was, by all accounts, relatively small and a well-known, well-established figure in the village of Pennant. Geographically there are also parallels. Mari's cottage is in an isolated spot across the river Arth from Castell Dinieth, so, like Mari, it is at once part of the village yet occupies a marginal position on the fringes of that community. We may, for example, recall Mari's accepted yet unacknowledged presence at chapel. To discount the archaeological remains of Berllan Biter would, therefore, be like not taking that final twist of the kaleidoscope to view the pattern as a whole. Even with the bulk of written evidence concerning Mari and her alleged witchcraft and magical activities, the picture truly comes into focus when we see her cottage.

Interestingly, there is another layer to the physical memoir offered by Berllan Biter, for Mari was also believed to carry out her bewitchments, or cursing, inside the property. According to local memory, she had a round table with a large basin of water, which contained a large ball of wool full of pins. When Mari would curse someone, she would read a chapter from the Bible and stick a pin into the ball of wool (Gruffydd 1984: 12). There are a great many facets of witchcraft and popular magical practices at play here. The ball of wool brings to mind one popular healing tradition of *Clwyf yr Edau Wlan*, yarn sickness, which was still practiced in some parts of Wales at the end of the twentieth century. For this, a thread of yarn, preferably pure Welsh wool, is used to measure from the inner elbow to the tip of the middle finger, which measures one cubit. This process is repeated three times, sometimes accompanied by prayers, and any measurement amounting to more

or less than three cubits was seen as an indication of poor health, while the likelihood of recovery also depended on the length of the wool after measuring.¹² The pins Mari used are indicative of the contents of witch-bottles and pots used for counter-magic. The bottle, which would contain some form of liquid or urine, represented the witch's bladder, into which other sharp and tactile objects such as nails, pins, hair, or human nail clippings were inserted as a means of tormenting the witch into revealing her identity and thus breaking the spell (Davies 1999: 218; Davies 2003: 108). A curious example was found on a farm in Holyhead in 1871, containing the dried carcass of a toad with about forty pins stuck into it (Gruffydd 1981: 42). The clear bowl of water is also a familiar centerpiece for certain magical rituals or incantations described in some Welsh conjuring books.¹³ This material evidence opens an interesting avenue of research into the paraphernalia of witchcraft, counter-magic, and conjuring rituals as described in the folk-record and the surviving manuscripts and conjuring books of cunning-folk. This provides yet another example where archaeological expertise and the studies of the archaeological findings of witchcraft could potentially supplement the written evidence. As Houlbrook and Armitage argue, such beliefs, "materially manifested," are worthy of both academic and archaeological attention (Houlbrook and Armitage 2015: 1).

Historical sites like Berllan Biter are also worthy of heritage interpretation, but no doubt, like many other similar witchcraft-related and supernatural sites across Wales, there is not any such heritage connected to Mari's cottage or her story. This is a challenge faced by many historians, as Andrew Sneddon highlights in his article in the present volume. Focusing on a key project based on Ireland's last witch trial in 1711, Sneddon highlights the difficulties we historians face in elucidating the more elusive cultural heritage of forgotten witchcraft trials in countries where such events, and the memories surrounding them—whether written or physical—are equally challenging (see the article by Sneddon in this issue). The case of Mari is no exception here. Besides a brief biography of Mari as one of Pennant's "notable people" on the community website, her cottage, which is key to her life and role in the community and its witchcraft beliefs, has completely escaped any cultural and heritage interest. Like Ffynnon Elian, despite a wealth of printed and local information about her life and the magical beliefs surrounding her, the only physical testament to her story remains as historically and culturally remote as it is geographically.

PENDLE HILL

If we compare Berllan Biter with the example of Pendle Hill, the disparity is stark. Here, the connection to one of the most famous and perhaps exceptional witch trials in English history in 1612 is key to its promotion as a beauty spot and cultural heritage site. As James Sharpe argues, the Lancashire witches have been “appropriated by the tourist and heritage industries” (Sharpe 2002: 1). Pendle Hill and the surrounding area have been hugely successful in attracting Heritage Lottery funding to help bolster and maintain the landscape, its heritage, and any potential activities surrounding it.¹⁴ The history of the Pendle witches provides the hook, the unique selling point to attracting these heritage schemes and investments; yet these are centered on the landscape more so than its history. Pendle Hill is promoted as an area of outstanding natural beauty and conservation. This perhaps is not surprising, as the landscape has always been intricately bound with its supernatural incidents. Even during the events surrounding the witch trials of 1612, Pendle Hill, “in all its brooding splendour,” was seen amongst the local populace as a suitable meeting place for witches (Sharpe 2002: 15). Even for the historical novelist William H. Ainsworth, the landscape became as much a central character in his famous novel, *The Lancashire Witches: A Romance of Pendle Forest*, first published in 1849 and opening with a scene in Pendle Hill, including a detailed description of its geographical location and views from its summit. As Jeffrey Richards points out, the book beautifully blends historical topography, an antiquarian love of historic buildings, traditions and customs, and the gothic romance narrative, bringing the landscape and the historical characters of the witches to life.¹⁵

Landscape, as we know, and as many of the papers in this issue highlight, is key to the supernatural and can inspire and attract in equal measure. Pendle Hill provides yet another prime example of this. Archaeologists even discovered a “Witch’s cottage” near the area, uncovered during some engineering works in 2011. This, too, was seen as a great discovery for the history of the area generally, though there is no firm evidence to suggest that this was inhabited by a “witch”; it may simply be a random house.¹⁶ But again, we can see the popular pulling power of any possible witchcraft links, no matter how tenuous. With Pendle Hill, its supernatural link to the twelve accused Pendle witches and the nine that were found guilty and hanged—though at Gallows Hill in Lancashire, and not Pendle Hill as might be expected—has worked very well for the area as a cultural heritage and sightseer destination.

The situation could not be more different with Mari's cottage and the surrounding community of Pennant. If you did not know about Mari and Berllan Biter, you wouldn't even know the cottage was there, or that the village had such a fascinating history. And I wonder if this lack of cultural or heritage interpretation, in contrast to Pendle Hill, reflects the amount of academic attention and historical interpretation given to the sites. Wales, unlike Europe, and England to a lesser extent, did not experience the "witch craze" as it were, nor any intense localized prosecutions. Analysis of surviving court records by Richard Suggett, for example, shows that for the thirty-five cases for which details survive, forty-two suspects were prosecuted for witchcraft between 1568 and 1698. The number of acquittals was surprisingly high, with only eight guilty verdicts recorded, and a mere five suspected witches condemned to death in three separate cases in 1594, 1623, and 1655 (Suggett 2018: 14). As a result, Wales, or the Welsh experience of witchcraft, has been seriously overlooked in comparison to that in England and Europe more generally. This situation has much improved in recent years thanks to the work of Owen Davies and Suggett, but there is still much that Wales has to offer to the field of witchcraft and supernatural research, as well as to related themes such as continuation of witchcraft beliefs and demonology. While these are by now well-established themes in the history of European witchcraft and are continuing to gain excellent ground, Wales, initially a promising contributor, is in many respects just starting out.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

How we treat the supernatural in history and archaeology also reflects the degree of its cultural and heritage analysis. There is something quite Victorian still in how information on the supernatural is recorded, conveyed, and understood. Books on the supernatural, like about Mari's cottage, are often found on the peripheries of academic writing, hovering almost wraith-like between the worlds of academia, folklore, and the more popular, consumer-type local legends and gruesome histories that so often and frustratingly lack the researcher's gold mine of references and bibliographies. Houlbrook and Armitage have also shed light on this disregard of the "supernatural," a word which, they argue, does not necessarily carry much academic weight or credibility. Subjects like superstition (folk-belief), the "supernatural" and magic often "linger on the edge" of more traditional, respectable disciplines, not quite falling into academic oblivion but never quite establishing themselves as key, laudable subjects (Houlbrook and

Armitage 2015: 2). The key, for Houlbrook and Armitage, is to be aware of this “reluctance” to name a subject and to embrace these terms and engage with them as you would any other academic subject, rather than risk pushing these subjects further into academic oblivion (Houlbrook and Armitage 2015: 3).

This is certainly an encouraging move; however, the situation is far more complex than mere terminology. There are physical obstacles to overcome with many of these sites, in addition to the fissure that often exists between the physical and written evidence relating to such places. In many instances, such as the as that of *Tarren Ddeusant*—a holy well or possible pagan shrine in Castellau, Rhondda Cynon Taff¹⁸—the dearth of written evidence and research coupled with its random and remote location has left this site in somewhat of a historical and heritage interpretation desert. And, as noted above, there is the added challenge of the nature of such evidence, which can be difficult for historians and archaeologists alike to navigate, along with the academic gulf that often exists between the two disciplines. The situation calls for us to redress our landscapes, real and imagined, as much as our terminology.

Mari’s story has suffered from such historiographical neglect. So, in the spirit outlined above, the same spirit that provided the premise for our symposium and subsequently for this special issue, highlighting the people and the stories connected to sites like Ffynnon Elian and Berllan Biter, and their significance, is a means to redress this imbalance. The example of Mari also raises the question of how and why the physical remnants that are left behind, such as the small, ruined cottage—which in itself tells us so much about the role of Welsh witches in the community and society generally—have also fallen victim to this historical neglect. Would we be confronted with the same situation if it were a house, or ruin, or natural wonder connected to St David, or Llewellyn the Great, or King Arthur or Merlin for example?

From abandoned “ghost villages,” such as Dunwich on the Suffolk coast, and Tyneham in Dorset,¹⁹ or the *Sídhe* in Ireland, to the lost drowned kingdom of *Cantre’r Gwaelod* off the Cardigan coast (see Bromwich 2013: 215–42) and the multi-layered world heritage site of St Kilda in the Outer Hebrides,²⁰ the ways in which the supernatural or uncanny elements of these places are communicated varies considerably according to their contexts. Factors such as location, conservation, funding, tourism, historical analysis, and archaeology all play a crucial part. The supernatural is often a useful draw to what may otherwise be seen as too remote or too empty a landscape. This raises an interesting question: would Berllan Biter be so interesting if it was nothing more than a ruined cottage? Yet Welsh witches were very much a part of the community and tolerated

to a certain degree, so “supernatural” beliefs and experiences such as Mari’s were a “part of the fabric” of everyday life in a Welsh community (Jenkins 1977: 440). Indeed, the humble ruins of Berllan Biter tell us as much, if we, as historians and cultural and heritage experts, can tailor our expert eyes and ears towards the many stories emanating from such sites. And this of course raises the question of how historians and heritage experts can better work together to ensure that all layers of history are revealed, supernatural or otherwise.

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NOTES

1. Beliefs about the witches' origins vary: some accounts claim that they were from Ireland, while others state that they were descended from gypsy ancestors from whom they derived their powers in witchcraft and fortune-telling.
2. Owen 1896: 225. For more on the witches of Llanddona and the significance of cursing and blessing to Welsh witchcraft, see Suggett 2008: 58, 86, 107; 42–63. All translations from Welsh are my own.
3. National Museum of History, MS 1397, witchcraft charm. See also correspondence of Gwyn Lewis to Robin Gwyndaf, 20 August 1964. For an account of Evan Griffiths's instructions to a farmer believed to have been bewitched see the oral testimony of Francis Thomas of Carno: <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/606781>, accessed 16 November 2021.
4. For more on Welsh cunning-women see Tallis 2019: 231–53.
5. Original Welsh: "Clywais lawer son am danat, Dy fod yn gwella pawb ddaw atat'; 'Gwelais lawer iawn . . . Wedi cael eu hollol wella, Trwy fy yfed am rai dyddia."
6. *Cambrian*, 17 April, 1819; Anonymous 1860: 21. The evidence is slightly confusing. Evans is the most notorious keeper of the well, which he took over from a Sarah Hughes, but this would seem to contradict the account of John Edwards, so it is tempting to assume that they were one and the same. However, a report in the *Gwylidydd*, in 1826, refers to John Edwards's imprisonment, and claims that "an old witch" is currently acting as the "offeryn wraig" (female keeper), and there is no reference to John Evans. See Brycheiniog 1826: 53–54.
7. Fortunately, the current "keeper of the well," local historian Jane Beckerman whose family purchased the farm and land on which the well lies, has published an account of the well's history, Beckerman 2017.
8. National Museum of History Tapes 1538-9, informant: Dan Jones.
9. National Museum of History Tapes 1538-9, informant: Dan Jones.
10. <http://www.monachmansion.co.uk/estate/>.
11. All census records are accessible via the Pennant Community website: <http://www.cymunedpennantcommunity.org.uk/page41.php>.
12. T. Gwynn Jones recorded a lot of information on woollen yarn healing, 1930: 130–32; see also Philpin 1995–1996: 80–83.
13. In particular: the nineteenth-century National Library of Wales MS 99E *Llyfr Dewiniaeth* (Conjuration Book), p. 24.
14. See: <https://www.forestofbowland.com/Pendle-Hill-LP>; <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/news/halloween-funding-boost-home-pendle-witches>; and also <https://www.visitlancashire.com/explore/pendle-hill>; <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2015/oct/30/pendle-bowland-forest-lancashire-england-halloween>.

15. Richards 2002: 185; and Ainsworth 1849. The novel is still in print.
16. See here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lancashire-16066680>.
17. Jenkins 1977: 440–62 and Morgan and Clark 1976. See also Suggest 2008 and Tallis 2015.
18. <https://coflein.gov.uk/en/site/307746/>.
19. <https://www.visit-dorset.com/things-to-do/tyneham-village-p136333>.
20. <http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20161019-the-eeriest-island-in-the-world>.