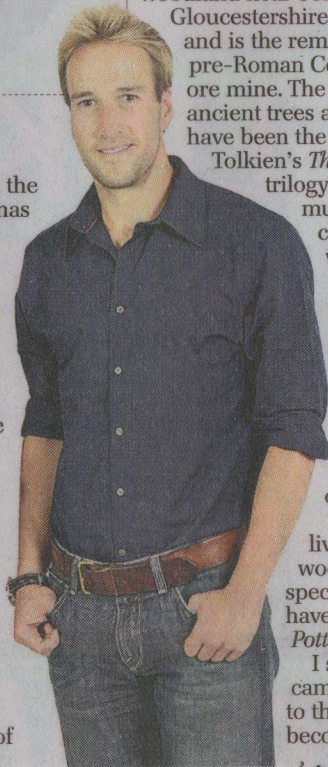


# COUNTRY DIARY

BEN FOGLE

Thick moss hung from the branches like Christmas decorations, while thick tree roots had penetrated the pinnacles of stone-like tentacles, splitting enormous rocks in two with their enormous power. Thousands of years of growth had created a maze of roots and branches. In places trees had fallen only for new ones to sprout from their fallen limbs. I counted five trees springing from the body of one fallen Elm.

Puzzlewood is an otherworldly place, a labyrinth of paths and trails and nooks and crannies, and caves and hollows through a corner of



the Forest of Dean. The ancient woodland near Coleford in Gloucestershire covers 14 acres and is the remains of a pre-Roman Celtic open cast iron ore mine. The hidden caves and ancient trees are thought to have been the inspiration for Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, after he spent much of his childhood in the woodland.

It certainly bore a resemblance to how I always imagined Middle Earth, with its tangle of tree roots engulfing the rocks and stone formations on the forest floor.

J K Rowling also lived close to the wood, leaving some to speculate how it may have inspired her *Harry Potter* books.

I spent last weekend camping in a Yurt near to the Forest which has become popular as a

film location with both *Dr Who* and *Merlin* using it as a set.

The Royal Forest of Dean got its royal appendage after it was designated a royal hunting ground. Today, the hunting has gone, replaced by an estimated 300 wild boar that roam the forest floor.

Within Puzzlewood itself, the geological features – known as “scowles” – originate through the erosion of the natural underground cave systems.

The ancient mining of iron ore accentuated the puzzle-like landscape, leaving it pockmarked with dips and troughs, leading to the “puzzle” in its name. A series of wooden paths and bridges were laid in the 19th century and they remain largely unchanged today.

There are even rumours of hidden treasure after a team of workmen discovered a small cavity in the rocks in which they found an earthenware jar containing 3,000 Roman coins.

It really is an ethereal experience to wander through this magical forest and through the thin moss-covered gullies. In places, droplets of moisture sparkle like gold dust – or “angel dust” as the local children like to call it.

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