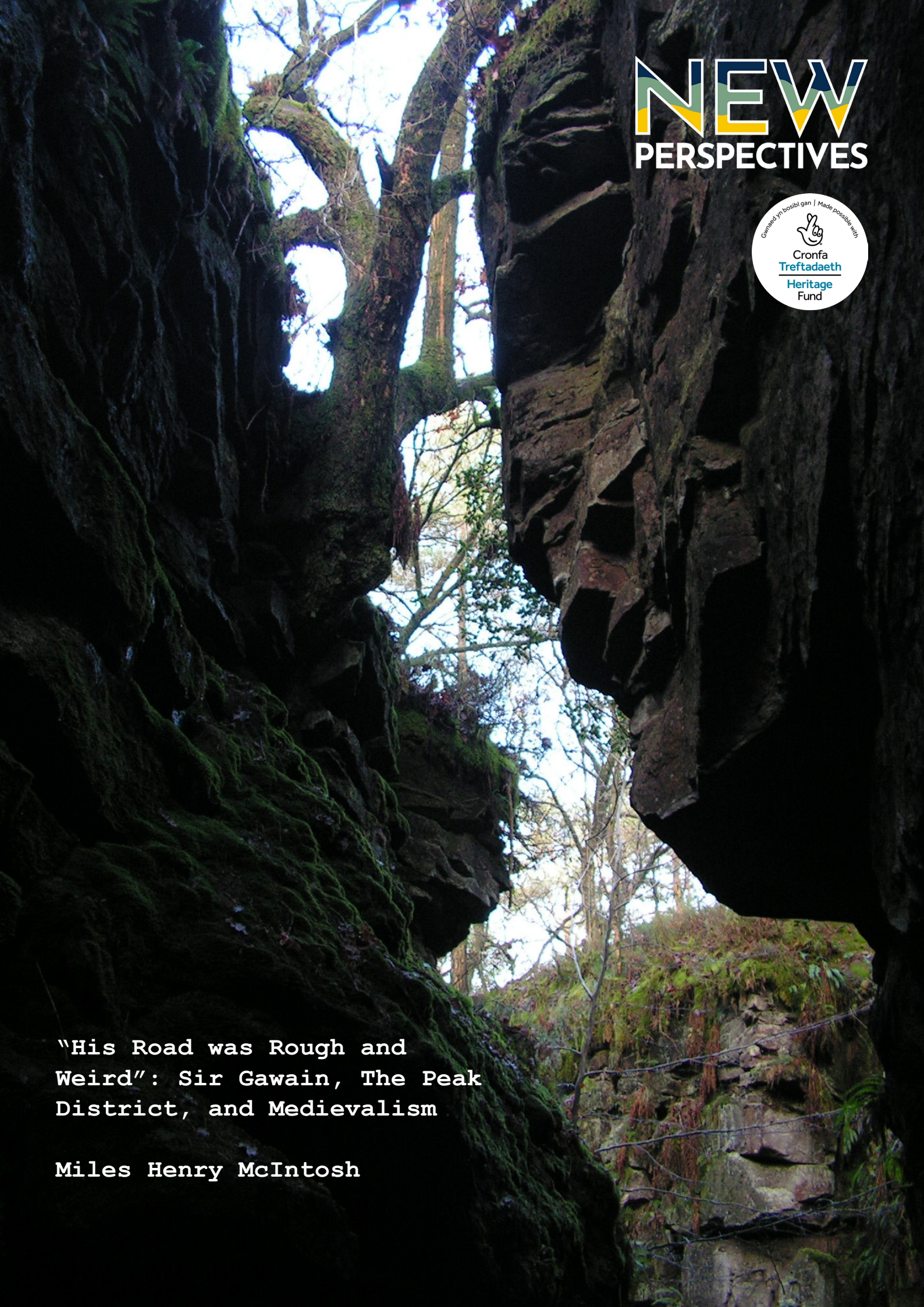

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# "His Road was Rough and Weird": Sir Gawain, The Peak District, and Medievalism

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I

Abbey Farm lies on the western edge of the Peak District National Park. While the current building is impressive; a fine example of seventeenth century architecture, it is named after, and made from pieces of Dieulacres Abbey, a Cistercian monastery founded in 1214.

Nothing much remains of the original building, which did not survive the ravages of the dissolution. Two eroded pillars stand on the grounds of the farm whose barn is constructed from remnants of the abbey.

The modern barn is an odd construction, bits of thirteenth century masonry poke out from the rather shabby outbuildings, here and there trefoil arches, and the white, bone-like tops of columns, jut from out of the red bricks. The windows of the barns are made up from the fine gothic arches of the monastery. These bits and pieces, the eroded pillars, stand, like the other ruins of Cistercian monasteries throughout Europe, bleached and silent "*witnesses to an order for which silence was an integral part of spiritual life*".

Dieulacres was chosen, like all Cistercian monasteries, for its seclusion. Founded in 1098 in Citeaux, France, the Cistercian order were "*at once reformers and traditionalists*", known as "white monks", they lived their life in the pursuit of devout isolation, and expectant silence.

The lives of the monks at Dieulacres amongst the barren Staffordshire moorlands are easily romanticised. The Cistercian order, at their best, represented the apogee of medieval religious expression.They were dedicated to spiritual truth and study but their isolated lives were not always easy — Saint Aelred, Abbot of Rievaulx abbey in Yorkshire, recorded his emotions in his manuscript, The Mirror of Charity:

*How often, good Jesus, does day incline to evening, how often does the daylight of some slight consolation fade before the black night of an intolerable grief? Everything turns to ashes in my mouth; wherever I look, I see a load of cares. If someone knocks, I scarcely notice; my heart is turned to stone, my tongue sticks fast, my tear ducts are dry.*

The world that the Cistercian order inhabited was polarised and violent. The light of their spiritual exile often failed to pierce the darkness of the wilderness that they inhabited. The forests of the Staffordshire peak, in the medieval imagination, were places to be avoided for very practical reasons, wolves still existed in the Staffordshire forests until the middle of the 14th century.

They were also to be avoided for reasons that were more ephemeral. Forests in the medieval period existed "on the margins of human credibility" — they were places where the super and supra-human could exist. An 1150 poem, attributed to Geoffrey of Monmouth, describes how Merlin, mad with grief due to the loss of his friends in battle, retreated to the woods, in order to find peace.

*Fit silvester homo quasi silvis deditus esset.*
*Inde per estatem totam nullique repertus.*
*Oblitusque sui cognatorumque suorum*
*Delituit silvis obductus more Ferino*

*"He became a wild man of the woods, as if dedicated to the woods. So for a whole summer, he stayed hidden in the woods, discovered by no one, forgetful of himself and of his own, lurking like a wild thing"*

The woods were places where one could draw closer to God, but in doing so, one risked a kind of animalistic madness. Almost half a millennium after Geoffery of Monmouth's time, the monks at Dieulacres, and indeed the world, felt as if they were going mad.

The year 1400 sits right at the mid-point of what scholars call "The Crisis of the Late Middle Ages", what the Spanish monk Alvarus Pelagius described as a "tempus fermantatum", a "time of fermentation" . By 1400, England and France were engaged in the Hundred Years War, in 1396, the Ottoman Empire had crushed a coalition of crusader armies at Nicopolis, opening up a gateway to central Europe.

The Western schism, a split in the Catholic church between two opposing popes, resulted in a weakened institution. The authority of the church was, in turn, questioned by theologians such as John Wycliffe in Oxford, and Jan Hus in Prague — each proclaiming their version of proto-Protestantism, the "morning stars" of the reformation to come. This crisis now came to Staffordshire. Lollards, heretics who questioned the authority of the Catholic church, preached in the common tongue in secret, amongst the forests and chasms of the high peak.

Dieulacres Monastery itself was not insulated from these worldly crises. One book has come down to us, from this time, that can be confirmed as having come from Dieulacres — a chronicle bearing the name of the abbey.

Known as Gray's Inn MS no. 9, it, along with some surviving cartularies, prove that the lives of the monks during this period were anything but peaceful. The monastery had been granted lands around the area and were apparently very litigious in extracting tithes from the local population. The Abbot of Dieulacres operated an "armed band" that marauded around Staffordshire. In 1380, the Abbot himself was arrested; he had ordered the murder and subsequent beheading of a Leek man known as John Warton, who had gotten into a fight with one of his servants. He was subsequently acquitted.

Though the fourteenth century was a time of crisis, it was also a time of rich cultural expression. The late Middle Ages were possessed of a "violent tenor", which expressed itself in passionate emotion, religious asceticism and ecstasy, as well as violence, both staged, and actual. This was the golden age of tournaments, jousting, courtly love and chivalry — both real and imagined. This was the age that saw the perfection of medieval romance literature, tales of heroes surmounting impossible odds through guile and Christian faith.

The fourteenth century also saw a change in the way that the landscape was viewed. Borrowing from classical authors, writers in the fourteenth century began to idealise pastoral, simple lives dictated by the rhythms and processes of nature.

*"Henceforth I will take up a middle station, so I am resolved to leave off fighting and live by labour; Waging war is but damnation."*

The pastoral ideal of the landscape had come to represent, especially for the nobility, an idealised way of life, more in touch with nature. Rolling fields, clear brooks and shady trees were seen as places that could facilitate a more peaceful life, contrasted with the chaos that the world found itself in. The pastoral ideal was Janus faced. With an idealisation of pastoral scenery, came an idealisation of more dramatic inhospitable landscapes. Deep forests, ravines and especially mountains were all interesting to late medieval writers.

In the romances of the late Middle Ages, chivalric heroes must not only conquer their enemies, but also the landscapes that they find themselves in. In 1336, the philosopher Petrarch ascended Mount Ventoux, a small mountain in France.

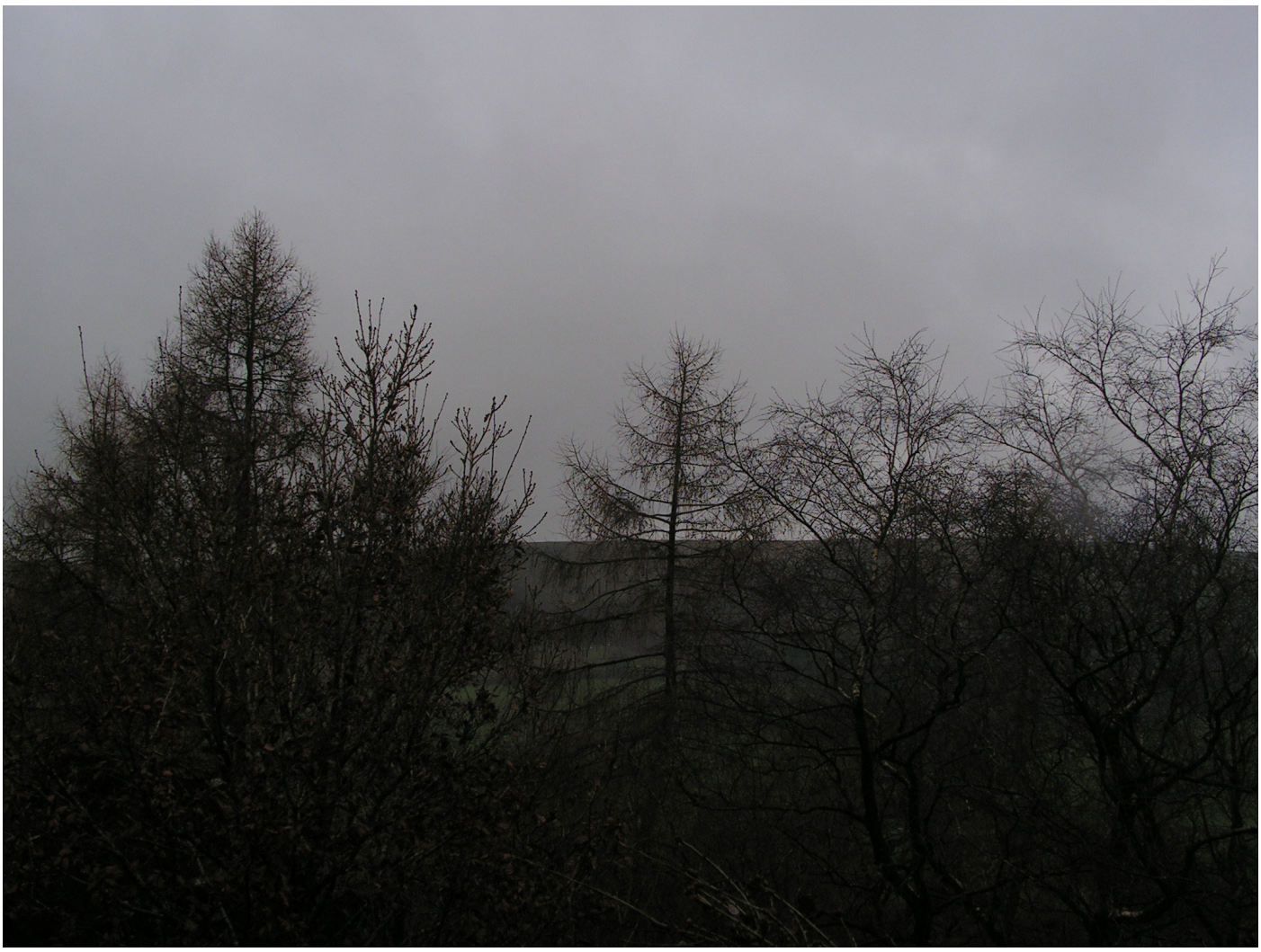
After an arduous climb, at its peak he "stood as one dazed", briefly unable to comprehend the view that he was faced with, he perceived the vastness of the landscape, the heavens above him, the mountain itself leading him to a moment of incisive self-reflection: *"I rejoiced in my progress, mourned my weaknesses, and commiserated the universal instability of human conduct."*

His ascent is commonly cited as a changing point in medieval attitudes towards nature. People began to seek landscapes, particularly wild, high spaces, simply to observe them, but also to narrativise them. They became sites for personal self-reflection, communion with God — and places for heroes to test themselves.

This renewed interest in the landscape brought with it a renewed danger. The end of the thirteenth century saw the complete end of what climate historians call the “medieval warm period”. The ‘little ice age’ had begun. As the multiple crises of the fourteenth century whirled, so too did the seasons. Winter became more merciless with temperatures dropping as much as 2 degrees in parts of Europe. And so, winter came to Dieulacres.

Winter was once a time for stories. Amidst the climactic, religious and political strife of the fourteenth century, a monk set down a tale, one copy of which survived the collective strife of half a millennium to come down to us. It acted as a salve for an age of chaos and, in the case of the actions of the monks of Dieulacres, one of corruption and sin. It was a tale of a more heroic age.

II
*wild wind in the welkin makes war on the sun,*
*the leaves loosed from the linden alight on the ground, and all grey is the grass that green was before:*
*all things ripen and rot that rose up at first,*
*and so the year runs away in yesterdays many,*
*and here winter wends again, as by the way of the world*
*it ought*



To a modern, or late medieval reader, there is a profound, and prolonged sense of sadness in the poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. At first, we are treated to a scene of utter joy — a Christmastime celebration at Camelot castle. Even now, a reader can hear the revelling echo through the legendary halls. We know how this story ends, however. The medieval Arthurian romances all end the same way — with the death of King Arthur and most of the principal characters, including Gawain himself.

The story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is set at the height of Arthur's legendary reign; it is an account from the apogee of a mythical golden age. The inevitability of the downfall is represented, deftly, by the poet's use of natural imagery, such as the extract above. With no regard for man's heroic deeds, nature endures.

Nature is personified in the person of the Green Knight, an uninvited visitor to the hall, who challenges Gawain to a game, wherein Gawain is free to strike the Green Knight, with the understanding that the blow will be returned to him in a year. Gawain, who is young and hubristic, beheads the Green Knight, only to have the creature pick up his own severed head, instructing Gawain to find him at the 'Green Chapel' in a years' time. Gawain, facing combat against an invincible opponent has to reckon with the inevitability of his own death in a year's time. As summer turns gradually to winter, no amount of revelry will hide the fact that he must die.

*Figure 1: The Green Knight, Humanoid figure outlined by the rocks of Lud's Church*

There is a grim certainty to this poem, an emotional resonance that has survived the centuries, as well as the translation into modern English. Seasons pass, regardless of the actions of man, no matter how warm the summer, winter, inevitably, must follow.

Nature dwarfs man in the lines of the poem. Under the “aged oaks” and through the “huddled hawthorn” goes Gawain. Winter itself, more than any monster, is his main, unfeeling adversary. Gradually though, through the agency of nature, the test imparted by his journey, and confrontation with the Green Knight, who graciously spares him, Gawain is changed for the better — the barren, wintry landscape reflecting his imminent death. But the eternally verdant Green Chapel looms large in his psyche — a vision of life everlasting.

Unlike in many Medieval romance poems, Gawain inhabits a real, living landscape. The landscapes that it mentions were, and are, invested in meaning forever by their association with the text. The poem makes extensive mention of real geographical areas; King Arthur’s court in Wales hosts the beginning of the poem. Gawain then travels to Ynys Mon, and then on to the Wirral Peninsula, the last place mentioned by name in the poem.

As the poem gets closer to the Northwest, the poet's homeland, it takes on a more mythic air. The specific places are not real, unnamed or fictional, like Sir Bertilak's castle, but the landscape is. The high crags and that Gawain shelters amongst recall the dramatic rock formations in the western Peak District. When Gawain finally faces the green knight, he does so in the Green Chapel, a moss covered, natural chasm. This setting, along with its axe wielding inhabitant, is one of the most iconic locales in all medieval literature. Luds Church, a natural chasm, about 5 miles away from the former site of Dieulacres Abbey, matches the description of the green chapel eerily well. Coated on all sides by vibrant moss, it remains as impressive as the day it inspired the Gawain poet. Jagged rocks jut from the chasm's top, moss girds the walls as bare rocks peer from over the chasm top, blocking the sun like the heads of giants.

The final confrontation with the Green Knight at Lud's Church, or the Green Chapel, demonstrates that the courtly game between Sir Gawain and the Green Knight cannot subdue nature. The wild landscape affirms life as it simultaneously threatens it, the green mossy walls of the Green Chapel will endure, regardless of Gawain's fate, or indeed, the broader fate of humanity, the outlook of which was bleak at the close of the fourteenth century. The poem captures the anxieties of one age — and the longing for another. It linked these places, times, and anonymous people, forever with the physical landscape.

Dieulacres abbey is fading, its stone erodes with every passing year. Peeking out of one piece of brickwork, on one of the barns of Abbey farm, stares the face of a bearded green man. In the only photograph that I have seen of the face, leaves sprout from his mouth, as he stares, frowning, out of the wall, the only physical link between the manuscript and the abbey. The only reminder of the story. But the stone leaves are still there, the green man itself representative of rebirth, but also nature's stubborn persistence. The story survived.

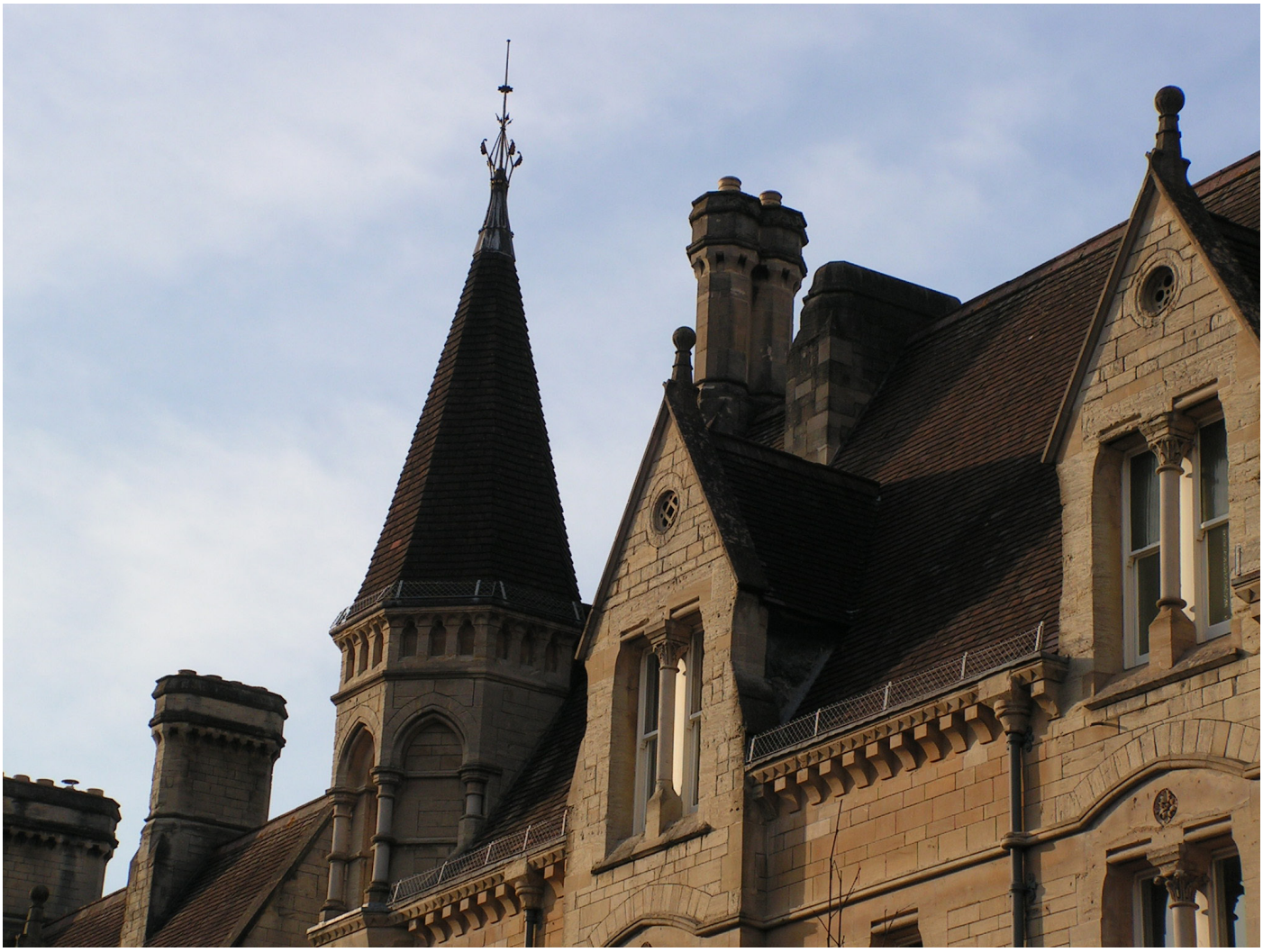


*Figure 2: Oxford: Where Frederic Madden once worked*

III

The Gawain manuscript, like the Green Chapel itself, endured. We have only one copy, that somehow managed to survive half a millennium. After it was written, it was lost, for over two-hundred years; there is a reference to it in the mid-seventeenth century catalogue of a private library. It was rediscovered again, acquired by the famous librarian Thomas Cotton, who moved it to the unfortunately named Ashburnham House, where in 1731, it survived a fire that damaged many other important documents. A century passed.

This manuscript, which contains some of the most important poetry of the late Middle Ages, was left abandoned,but was discovered in the bowels of the British Museum, in 1837. Pulling aside a cupboard door, the diary of Frederick Madden, assistant keeper of manuscripts, records his surprise on finding a room full of documents "covered with the accumulated dust of over 50 years" . Madden records an argument with one of his colleagues over whether or not they were worth restoring. Thankfully, they were. Amongst the other "fragments and crusts", was another manuscript, known as Cotton Vitellius A XV, which contained the only known surviving copy of Beowulf.

The manuscript would reappear to a world that had rediscovered chivalry.
The mid nineteenth century was the height of Victorian medievalism. A Tory aristocracy, fearful of their relevance in a nation increasingly defined by its industry, found solace in a kind of idealised feudalism. Medieval fashion, armour and weapon collecting, the medieval paintings of the pre-Raphaelites, and castellated country houses all abounded during this period.

Madden was very much caught-up in this medievalism, and it was possibly this very obsession that has secured the poem for posterity. Madden was also, like Gawain, a knight, Madden belonged to the Hanoverian Guelphic Order, a chivalric order founded by the Prince Regent, later George IV. Madden's diaries record a studious, diligent, though evidently disagreeable man, but also record an era that was clumsily rediscovering its own past and utilising their ideas about the Middle Ages in order to justify their present. Madden assiduously recorded all the book sales, auctions and mummy 'unwrappings' that he attended, but also the disappointing parties, empty flattery, and unrewarded work that was demanded of a Knight in the nineteenth century.

The two knights—stuffy scholar Madden and Gawain the warrior —makes for an entertaining image. It is the difference between Madden's London office, and the court of Camelot, Madden's rainy commute with Gawain's noble quest. Like the Dieulacres monk before him, Madden was rediscovering a past golden age, long since vanished, in order to cope with a chaotic, and rapidly changing present.

*Figure 3: Edale, View towards Kinder Scout*

Madden's generation were also important in re-discovering the landscapes of Britain. The romantic movement earlier in the nineteenth century, was instrumental in recognising the aesthetic beauty of places like the Peak District. Madden's generation of the mid nineteenth century added to this rediscovery by populating the landscapes with stories. Through stories such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the Peak District would be forever remain a place where tourists could "holiday in the middle ages".

Madden's transcription of the poem was undertaken at the behest of the Bannatyne Club, which was founded by the popular author of historical fiction Walter Scott. Scott's influence on the perception of the landscape is undeniable. Throughout the nineteenth century, tourists ventured out into the wild landscapes of Britain, in order to find remnants of Scott's romanticised vision of the past. Physical remains were important to preserving this vision of the middle ages, but so were natural features. Tourists found, and still do find, something intangible in these landscapes, a profound sense of place, informed by their understanding of the past. Organisations such as the Bannatyne club, and individuals such as Scott, and Madden played an important, though largely forgotten role in cultivating a renewed interest in the landscapes of Britain.

Madden, like the Dieulacres monk before him, was bringing to an expectant public a story that harkened back to a more chivalrous age. The landscape of the poem, the Dark Peak, had already become a place where people could go to experience some of the middle ages first hand; tourists already flocked to Peveril castle, in Castleton, as Madden's patron, sir Walter Scott, had set one of his novels there. Madden ensured the Place of Sir Gawain in the in the canon of English medieval literature, and ensured the landscape of the Peak District would be forever associated with the story, and the world that it came from. In fact, a diary entry of Madden's, just after he finished his transcription of the poem, records that he, while on holiday, spent an entire day reading Peveril of the Peak. Perhaps, the landscape of the Poem brought the Peak District to mind.

Landscapes are not natural phenomena, they are constructed, composed and maintained by humans. They exist physically, but also mentally, the cultural meaning of each individual landscape is subjective, but formed gradually, over many generations. Each national park is a landscape, a story, influenced by the context of its modern rediscovery, re-enchanted by its association with the mythic past.

Our modern understanding of the Peak District, and other national parks is influenced by medievalism. Places named after dragons or robin hood, along with real castles, all remain popular tourist destinations. All are remnants of an intangible heritage — remnants of a romantic past that never really existed.

It would be easy to dismiss Victorian Medievalism, as many have, as the ravings of a rapidly declining aristocracy. But it was as progressive a movement as it was regressive. Politically, many medievalists used medieval allegories to push for increased rights for workers during the industrial revolution, using the ideal of “merrie olde England” to justify and conceptualise their ideas around what constituted fair labour. With the landscape representing an idyllic vision of British life that lived in harmony with nature, and each other.

They accomplished this by re-enchanting the English landscape, filling it with stories. The 1830s saw the transcription of the Gawain manuscript, and also the first translation of the Mabinogion, the Welsh epic poem. The broader nineteenth century saw an increased interest in collecting and preserving folk stories, especially in regions that would become national parks. These landscapes would go from being appreciated for aesthetic reasons, to becoming essentially didactic spaces, telling stories that were relevant for national, and personal narratives.

From its inception, the poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was a product of the Peak District, making use of the region’s dramatic scenery for its narrative. Conversely, the landscape of the High Peak is a product of the poem, as well as the medievalism of the nineteenth century that helped to resurrect it.

The direct link between the Green Knight’s chapel, and Lud’s Church is historically tenuous, but it is undeniably there. The chasm itself, as well as the wider landscape of the Peak District is imbued with a numinous quality, that is not quite history, or myth. Lud’s Church, like the green chapel, will remain, the landscape of the Peak District itself is a story that is constantly unfolding.