

Fantasy Treehouses

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Rock-a-bye-baby on the tree top,
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock,
When the bough bends, the cradle will fall,
Down comes the baby, cradle and all.

attributed to Charles Dupee Blake, 1846-1903

The fantasy possibilities of hollow trees have always caught man's imagination. In our fairy tales, hollow trees, toadstools and underground burrows become peopled with twinkly-eyed dwarfs, friendly bears and a whole anthropomorphic world.

Readers of Beatrix Potter may remember the plight of poor little Timothy Tiptoes who was squeezed and shoved into a little opening in a hollow tree by the squirrels, and left. There he finds himself in a home of Chipmunk, who kindly puts Timmy to bed and proceeds to feed him with the nuts that his wife, Goody Tiptoes, had poured down the woodpecker's hole. Unfortunately Timmy gets so fat that he is unable to get out again. He's not sure if he wants to: even in an imaginery sense, hollow trees offer all of us a sense of security from the blasts of reality.

The mythical treehouse world is a theme that has preoccupied the Glastonbury artist John Morland. Glastonbury itself may be partly responsible. The famous Tor capped by a solitary tower, visible for miles, is, according to the town sign, 'the Ancient Isle of Avalon'. It is as if you are crossing the frontier into a land of legend - the realm of King Arthur, where Excalibur lies gleaming under the murky waters of the long-lost lake, waiting to be retrieved, and magician Merlin still holds mysterious sway.

There is no doubt that the town, with an eye to its tourist potential, pushes this image for all it is worth - which is quite a lot. A local newspaper, Glastonbury Commentator, 'the Alternative Life Style Newspaper', is crammed with snippets

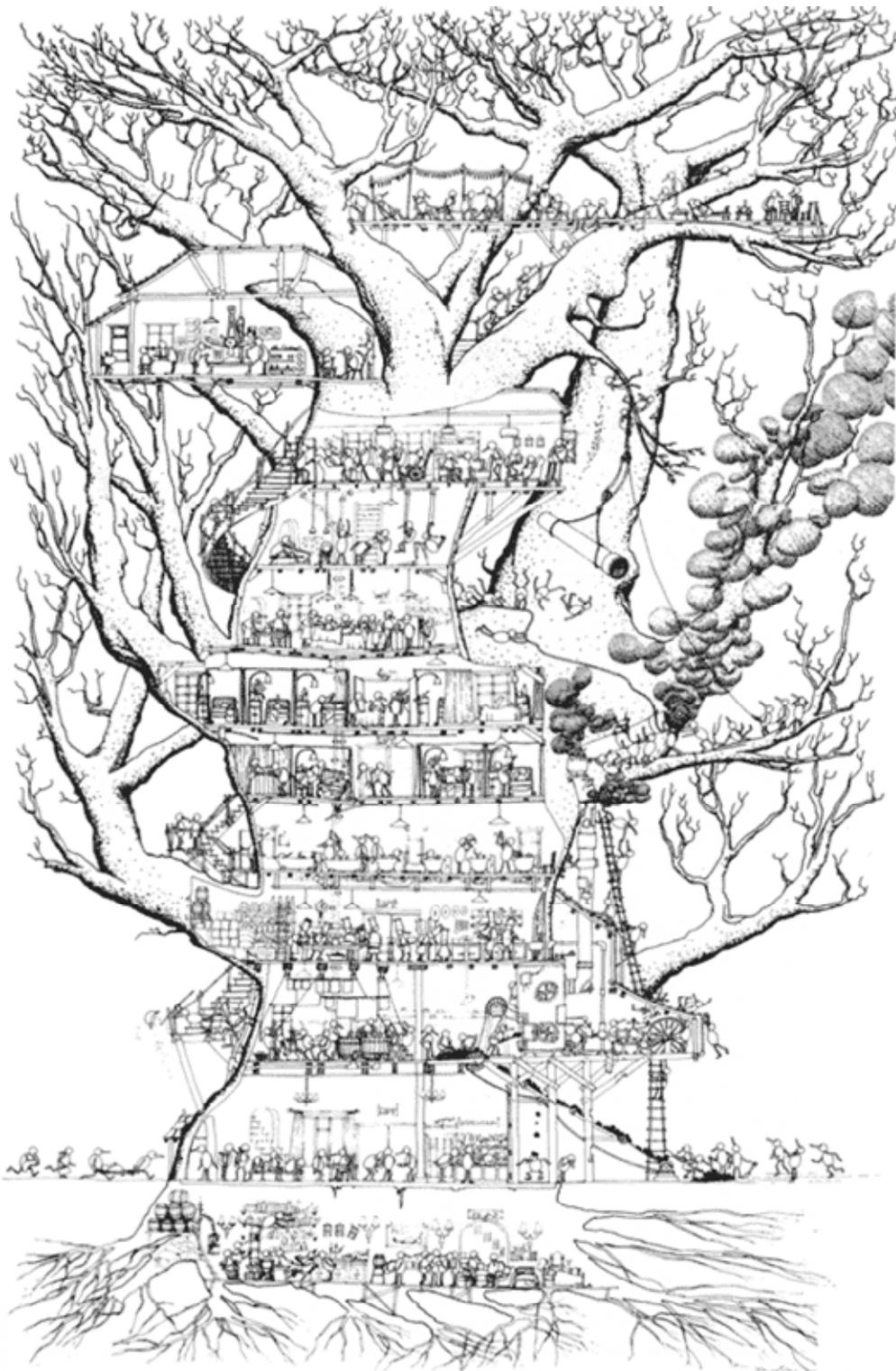
of otherworldly information provided by 'The Goddess Column', 'The Woodcraft Folk' and 'The Green Compost Group'. There are possibly more self-employed witches, palm-readers, pagan priestesses and spiritualists in Glastonbury than anywhere else in the kingdom, but there is certainly nothing whatsoever freaky about John Morland who, together with his wife Jan, runs the Morland Galleries, an elegant emporium of Portmeirion china, framed watercolours, herbs, souvenirs and suchlike.

John Morland, tall and rather reserved, has been painting and engraving for years. His treehouse fantasies date from his experiences at the hands of the National Health Service. His poster 'The Hospital Tree' was his own therapeutic way of giving vent to all his exasperation. The detail is brilliant and not without humour: myriads of robot figures, cooks, surgeons, nurses, porters, all identical in appearance and all busily 'beavering' away expressionlessly at their appointed tasks and getting in one another's way. The different levels of the tree are occupied by waiting-rooms, laundries, bathrooms, wards and operating theatres, with little figures spiralling up from one to the next until finally the patients emerge into the sunshine and the balconies among the branches at the top.

The sequel to the Hospital Tree poster was John Morland's 'Treehouses' where everything from a parish church to a Chinese pagoda gets hoisted aloft into the boughs.

The essential difference between this mythical treehouse world and any other is that John Morland has turned the idea on its head and politicized treehouses from being bastions of freedom and eccentricity into communes inhabited by automata with no obvious independent will of their own. There is a Hieronymous Bosch quality to his drawing, bizarre, fascinating and frightening at the same time. Not that the drawings lack humanity, but like the London underground at rush hour they are crowded and somewhat bewildering.

Jan Morland likens Glastonbury to a world of 'upward moving spiralists'. Was that what her husband's treehouse world is all about too? The only problem is what to do once one has reached the top. Jump? Later, as I climbed the steep Tor, joining and passing scattered bands of tourists spiralling their way haphazardly upwards, I felt almost happy to be human.



John Morland's hospital tree

J. R. R. Tolkien, Professor of English at Oxford was another man who lived largely in a fantasy world of his own creation. Writing in the rather bleak brick surrounds of his Oxford garage he invented all manner of unusual dwellings and dining places for his varied and versatile characters. His heroes were Hobbits or Halflings, little short, stout, furry humanoids who - like the celebrated Badger in *The Wind in the Willows* - preferred living in underground burrows. During their prodigious exploits in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the Hobbits are forced to seek the help and alliance of Elves who live in virtual cities high up in the trees. Tolkien describes how the Hobbits approach the Elven city of the Galadhrim - a green hill thronged with Mallorn trees of great height standing up against the twilight like towers, with countless lamps gleaming in the many-tiered branches. As the Hobbits enter the wood they hear voices drifting down through the canopy of leaves. On being summoned to do so, they enter the city by climbing up long ladders which have been let down, and they discover platforms or 'flets' arranged on each side of the boles of the trees. Some are even built right around the trunk with the ladder passing through them. Tolkien leaves us to imagine the detailed construction for ourselves - but the inference is that walls and roofs are made by interlacing branches. Finally the weary Hobbits - who are happier with their feet firmly on the ground - reach a wide platform - a talan, as big as the deck of a great ship. On the middle of this is a house large enough even for men to live in. A reminder that Hobbits were shorter than pigmies! In this house perched on the top of the tallest Mallorn tree the Hobbits are entertained by the hospitable elves, and although they initially regard the food and drink offered with some suspicion, they quickly come to appreciate its sustaining and nourishing qualities. The elves' lembas or waybread, which they take with them on their departure, serves them in much the same way as the concentrated foodstuffs used by modern astronauts.

On the other side of the world another teacher, James Baxter, was also intrigued by treehouses. James K. Baxter, was a teacher at a primary school in the Hutt Valley, New Zealand, and he wrote poems for his classes to use. He wrote them for 'the in-betweeners, the ones who are neither infants nor fully literate'. The themes sprang up in part from the

children's conversations - about animals, boats, railway trains, houses on fire, conditions of weather - and in part from his own memories of childhood. When he stopped being a teacher, he set the poems aside, partly because, as he admitted, he had no more need for them, and partly because they were not 'literary works'. One can imagine how his pupils enjoyed the following poem which he wrote during the 1960s:

John and Judith
And Billy and me,
We have our own house
In a willow tree.

It's built of boards
And battens and tin
From the packing case
That the tractor came in.

Up the slippery trunk
Of the tree we climb
With a rope to help us,
One at a time;

But once we're up
And safe inside
Only the wind knows
Where we hide.

Down in the paddock
The brown horse neighs
And in stormy weather
The whole house sways

Like a ship at sea
While the branches roar
And birds fly past
At the open door.

In 1974, Joanna Stubbs wrote and illustrated a delightful book for children called *The Tree House*. In this tree Emily, Matthew and Timothy played at pirates, kings and queens and shops all summer. However, before they could move in, they had to do a lot of work

In the tree there was a house . . . with a window, a door and a ladder made of rope to climb up and look inside.

They called it 'The Chestnuts'. It needed quite a lot doing to it. They mended the holes with wood and a hammer and nails. They swept out the old brown leaves and feathers and dust. They found a piece of corrugated plastic to put on the roof. They even painted the walls inside. And when all that was done they brought the furniture; an orange box, a lamp their mother had thrown away and, best of all, an armchair, very old but comfortably, which they found discarded in a shed. Tim wheeled it up the hill in a wheelbarrow. That was hard work, but not as hard as climbing up the rope ladder with it.

And then they moved in. They slept at home each night. But nearly every day they brought sandwiches to the house and played in the tree. No one else knew the secret. Except for the birds and animals, who soon got used to the children.

Other children's books of earlier years involving treehouses include several stories by Enid Blyton, *Hollow Tree House* and *The Magic Faraway Tree*. 'Its name is the Enchanted Wood,' said Jo [in Enid Blyton's *The Magic Faraway Tree*],

Up in the Milly-Molly-Mandy nest. Lots of children's stories of the twenties included treehouse romps



‘and in the middle is the most wonderful tree in the world. It goes right up to the clouds - and at the top it is always some strange land. You can go there by climbing up to the top branch of the Faraway Tree, going up a little ladder through a hole in the big cloud that always lies on the top of the tree - and there you are in some peculiar land.’

A number of children’s books were published during the 1920S involving treehouse adventures, including More of Milly-Molly-Mandy by Joyce Lankester Brisley - a mildly unnerving title for today’s adult reader. Milly-Molly-Mandy is quite an organizer. The entire family gets roped in to assist with the furnishing of her snug tree nest:

Then Grandma came across the meadow bringing some old cushions, and she tied them to the end of the rope, and little- friend-Susan pulled them up and arranged them on the carpet.

Then Auntie came along, and she tied a little flower vase on the end of a rope, and Milly-Molly-Mandy pulled it up and set it in the middle of the table. And now the Milly-Molly-Mandy nest was properly furnished, and Milly-Molly-Mandy was in such a hurry to get Billy Blunt to come and see it that she could hardly get down from it quickly enough.

The book is very prettily illustrated by the author, but full-blooded men are advised to grit their teeth and watch their blood pressure before tackling some parts of this childhood classic.

An enchanted wood that few of us ever tire of is that inhabited by Pooh Bear and his friends. In this world of Pooh Corner just about everyone seems to live in or up trees. Owl has a splendid treetop residence. Christopher Robin lived in a hollow tree at the very top of the Forest. He, Piglet and Pooh are always in and out of each other’s arboreal abodes: Pooh frequently getting stuck as a result of stealing too much honey!

A favourite cartoon character - Asterix, similarly favours living a safe distance above ground level. In Asterix and the Normans his main dwelling is a spacious timbered hall set on top of a decapitated oak tree.

Edward Lear’s limericks included anything that rhymed and tree was a natural choice. Thus we get the tale of the Old Man in a Tree.



*Christopher Robin's treehouse. Note the spiral staircase
and the little window*

There was an Old Man in a Tree,
Whose Whiskers were lovely to see;
But the Birds of the Air
Pluck'd them perfectly bare,
To make themselves Nests in that Tree.

Edward Lear

Perhaps this was the inspiration for his later treetop epic - The Quangle Wangle's Hat where just about every character he ever invented gathers on the top of the Crumpetty Tree where the Quangle Wangle sat complaining, 'very few people come this way'.

But there came to the Crumpetty Tree,
Mr. and Mrs. Canary;
And they said, - 'Did ever you see
'Any spot so charmingly airy?
'May we build a nest on your lovely Hat?
'Mr. Quangle Wangle, grant us that!
'O please let us come and build a nest
'Of whatever material suits you best,
'Mr. Quangle Wangle Quce!'

And the Golden Grouse came there,
And the Pobble who has no toes, -
And the small Olympian bear, -
And the Dong with a luminous nose.
And the Blue Baboon, who played the flute, -
And the Orient Calf from the Land of Tute, -
And the Attery Squash, and the Bisky Bat, -
All came and built on the lovely Hat
Of the Quangle Wangle Quee.



*On the top of the Crum petty Tree. Lear deposited his
entire cast of poetic characters in it*

In classical literature, one can scour the pages of Chaucer, Dante, Milton for references to treehouses without success. The Bible hasn't a word to say for them, and Shakespeare only a passing reference in Twelfth Night when Viola exclaims, 'Make me a willow cabin at your gate. . .'. Even Daniel Defoe ignores the potential of a treehouse in Robinson Crusoe, and it wasn't until J. R. Wyss wrote the hugely popular Swiss Family Robinson in 1813 that tree-houses became immortalized in literature.

The Swiss Family Robinson concerns the amazing adventures of a minister, his wife and four sons, Fritz, Ernest, Francis and Jack, after they are shipwrecked and cast up on a desert island. They are able to rescue some indispensables from the ship, but they survive largely on their own ingenuity in making use of everything they find on the island. They construct a wonderful house in a large tree where they are safe from wild animals, and are so content with their island life that they refuse to leave when a ship finally comes to their rescue.

More of this book later when we come to the chapter on building your own treehouse!

In 1917, the American writer Edgar Rice Burroughs published the first book in that immensely popular saga 'Tarzan'. Since then the story has been the basis for countless Hollywood movies. A recurrent theme in all of them is to see Tarzan

- the white man who has been brought up by apes - swinging through the trees on long creepers, uttering his frightening call as he comes to the rescue. He is also depicted as living in a spacious treehouse. With cinematographic licence, Hollywood can do anything. The actual story is slightly different. Tarzan is the son of Lord and Lady Greystoke who are set down on a remote West African beach when the crew of the Fuwalda, the barquentine they are sailing on, mutinies. Lord Greystoke does build a temporary treehouse - as is described later in the 'Build your own Treehouse' chapter, but this is principally to provide a refuge from the wild beasts of the forest while he completes a more substantial cabin. It is in this cabin that Tarzan is born, rescued by the apes when his parents die, and to which he constantly returns as he seeks to establish his own identity.

Major Charles Gibson may have taken a tip or two from Edgar Rice Burroughs when he wrote 'The Wizard King',



*'Pon my soul, I never thought I would live to make the acquaintance
of a man who lived in a tree,' said Wynne.
A sketch from The Wizard King*

serialized in *The Boys' Own Paper* 1920 (Volume XL, part III). In this story a band of explorers are seeking clues to the disappearance of an earlier expedition in hostile jungle territory.

... a moment after they were devouring plantains [bananas] with the voracity of hungry wolves. In the midst of this feast they were startled by a loud voice, and looking up they beheld a man with a long white beard who addressed them in perfect English.

'You trespass on my preserves,' said he. . . He led the way for some distance along the bank of the river until at last they came to a place where a limb of forest jutted forth to the margin of the water. Here was a clump of the most gigantic trees and Mellors and his companions were astonished when they beheld, hanging down the trunk of one of these trees a kind of rope ladder which had been very cleverly constructed out of the pliable, ropelike stems of a species of creeping plant that was plentiful, in the forest.

About forty feet from the ground the great branches of the tree were forked in the shape of a cup, and in the angle thus formed, occupying an area of about six square yards, a rude hut had been constructed, built of wood and thatched with the dried leaves of palm trees, placed one on top of the other, very close together in much the same manner as a roof is slated or tiled. Climbing up the rope ladder they found themselves in a chamber which was as ingenious as its site was original.

Though within there was plenty of room for the four of them, it was apparent at a glance that every effort had been made to economise space; there was a rifle rack and a folding table attached by hinges to the walls. These hinges were of untanned leather - obviously the skin of some wild animal, a rhinoceros or an elephant. The bed consisted of four rough pieces of wood, forming a rectangle across which strips of the same kind of leather had been attached, thus forming a mattress similar to that used by the South African Boers. This bed could be hoisted to the ceiling and lowered at will. Upon the shelves were packages of rifle ammunition and a box of shot-gun cartridges. There were many other things such as one would little expect to find in the midst of the wilderness - a clinometer, a prismatic compass, a few books on tropical botany and several carpenter's tools, everything in fact which Costello had been able to save from the illfated Davis Expedition.

'This,' said Wynne, 'is unique. 'Pon my soul, I never thought I would live to make the acquaintance of a man who lived in a tree!'