

by Dr. Karl P. N. Shuker

*New Thoughts on  
an Old Mystery*

HUMANOID'S

# The Green Children of Woolpit H

English medieval history and legend are sometimes so intricately interwoven that it can be exceedingly difficult to delineate with any degree of certainty the facts from the fantasy. The fascinating story of the green children of Woolpit is a particular case in point.

The date was the 12th century A.D., but has been variously placed by chroniclers within the reign of King Stephen (1135–54) or King Henry II (1154–1189). The setting was the small Suffolk village of Woolpit, named after the deep trenches in which wolves were formerly captured. One day, the villagers were amazed to see two very unusual children crawling out of one of these trenches. A girl and a slightly younger boy, they were both dressed in strange clothing and spoke an unintelligible language. But by far the most striking characteristic of these children was their skin—it was green!

Unable to communicate with them,

and thoroughly perplexed as to what should be done, the villagers took the girl and boy, who were weeping and very forlorn, to the home of Sir Richard de Calne,

a local landowner. Here they remained, treated with great care and kindness by Sir Richard and his servants. But the boy fell ill, and in less than a year he had died. Hap-



Woolpit center and village square



St. Mary's Church, Woolpit

pily, however, the girl survived, and as she grew older her skin's green hue gradually disappeared. She eventually married a man from King's Lynn in Norfolk, a senior ambassador of Henry II according to some sources, and became known as Agnes Barre.

During her years in Sir Richard's household, Agnes learned English and was eventually able to reveal something about where she and her brother had come from and the manner in which they had reached Woolpit. She claimed that they were from

a Christian place called St Martin's Land, where it was always twilight (and also where, according to one medieval chronicler of this story, everything was green), and which was separated from a much sunnier place by a wide river. One day, while tending their father's flocks in a field, Agnes and her brother had been led away by the sound of church bells into an underground realm, and then somehow found themselves in Woolpit.

This peculiar account has lent itself to many different interpretations. Eminent

British folklorist Dr. Katharine Briggs noted in *A Dictionary of Fairies* (1976) that it contained a number of themes prevalent in Faerie lore—the color green, a twilit land, subterranean worlds. Could this entire story thus be nothing more than another legend of elves or fairies visiting mankind?

In 1997, astronomer Duncan Lunan, assistant curator at Scotland's Airdrie Observatory, offered a much more dramatic solution. Speaking in London at the annual conference (UnConvention) held by the popular British magazine *Fortean Times*, he proposed that the green children were actually aliens who had accidentally been transported to Earth from another planet by a malfunctioning matter transmitter.

Other theories proffered at one time or another include:

- The possibility that our planet is hollow and that the green children had emerged from a hidden world contained within Earth's interior.

- They were immigrants from northern Scandinavia, where there is less light than in sunny Suffolk.

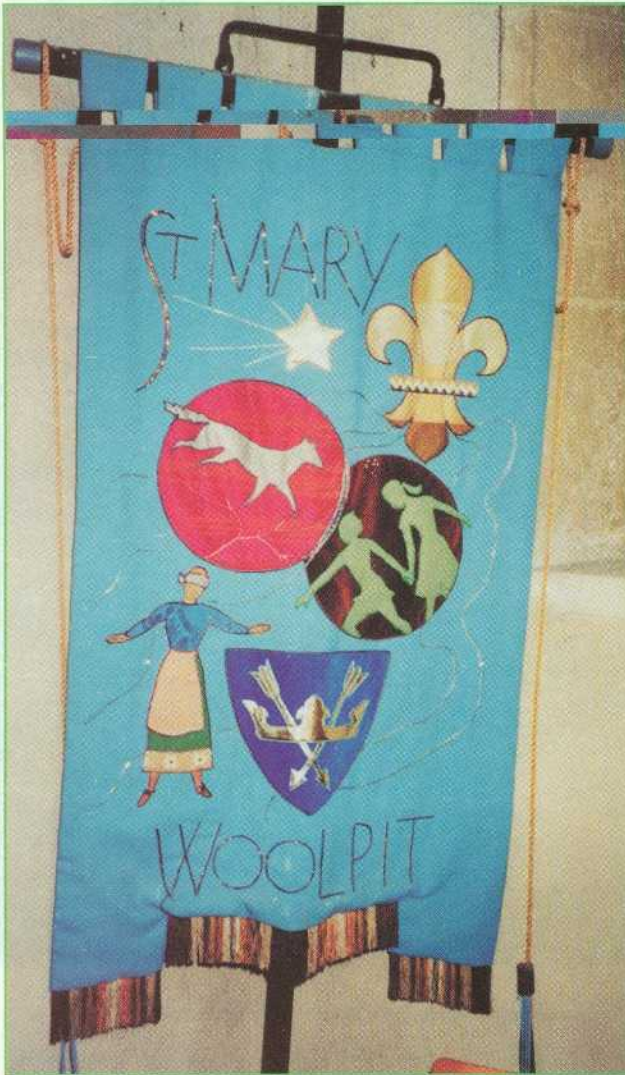
- They are personifications of Nature, hence akin to the Green Man or Jack-in-the-Green.

- Traditional Woolpit belief claims that they were real-life "babes in the wood," having been abandoned in the nearby forest by an evil uncle seeking to claim their inheritance for himself.

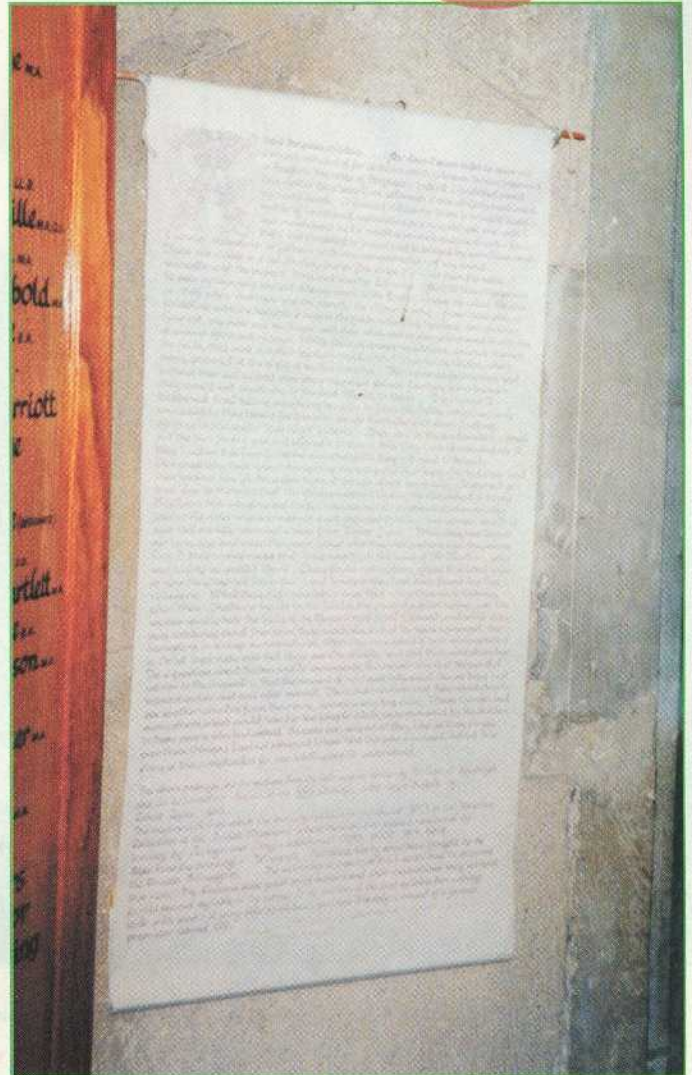
According to their most persistent researcher, however, the origin of the green children is much more straightforward, and local, than any of those mentioned above. In an extensive paper published by the scholarly periodical *Fortean Studies* in 1998, Paul Harris produced the following scenario as a comprehensive explanation of the green children episode:

Prior to the time of Henry II (and the most popular date for the green children's appearance is 1173, which falls within his reign), eastern England had witnessed a steady influx of Flemish merchants and weavers from Belgium. Once Henry II became king, however, they suffered great persecution, and at a battle near Bury St. Edmunds in 1173, many were slaughtered. Harris proposed that the green children

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Church banner of St. Mary's Church depicting the green children



Scroll inside St. Mary's Church documenting the history of the green children

were of Flemish parentage and had probably originated from or near the village of Fornham St. Martin (thus explaining their mysterious St. Martin's Land), situated just a few miles northwest of Woolpit and separated from it by the River Lark.

According to Harris's theory, it could be that their parents had been killed, but the two children had successfully escaped the carnage by fleeing into Thetford Forest. Its shadowy depths would certainly seem like twilight to two young, scared children. And if they had lingered there for any length of time without obtaining much food, they may well have suffered from malnutrition—one effect of which, called chlorosis, is a gradual greening of the skin.

Eventually, following what Harris believes to have been the sound of the church bells at nearby Bury St. Edmunds, they may have wandered into one of the many underground mine passages associated with Thetford and ultimately leading to Woolpit. Here, when they later emerged in a bewildered state, with starvation-induced greenish pallor, disoriented by the bright sunlight after having spent so long in the forest and underground passageways, dressed in unfamiliar Flemish costumes, and speaking an equally unfamiliar Flemish dialect, they would certainly have presented a very strange spectacle to the Woolpit villagers.

Harris's theory is very interesting and provides convincing explanations for many

of the story's enigmatic facets. Today, the green children, like the wolves, are long gone from Woolpit, but their memory lives on in a beautiful village sign here, and also in the banner of Woolpit's church. They may also live on in a much more literal manner. While conducting his own research, Duncan Lunan was contacted by an American who sent him a copy of his family tree, which suggested that he was a descendant of Agnes. If this is indeed true, then the saga of Woolpit's green children may still have some notable surprises to unfold even today. 8

*Dr. Karl P. N. Shuker is a cryptozoologist who lives in West Bromwich, England. He is the author of Mysteries of Planet Earth.*