

A corgi with fairies
(AI-generated image).



The Fairy Mythology of Corgis

Sarah Allison

A popular theme in modern dog books and on the Internet is that Corgis are a dog breed steeped in legend, associated with fairies in ancient Welsh lore. Fairies frequently appear in Corgi-themed art and writing.¹ The idea of the magical Corgi has been characterised as 'Welsh tradition',² 'Welsh legend',³ 'myth',⁴ or 'ancient'.⁵ Descriptions range from 'a local legend'⁶ to 'romantic tales ... passed on for centuries'.⁷ According to dog psychology expert Stanley Coren, '[s]ome say that the very name of the breed contains its fabled origin, since it combines the Welsh word for dwarf (*cor*) with the form for dog (*gi*) to produce *corgi*, or "dog of the dwarfs"'.⁸ According to the most widespread version of the tale, these dogs were once the steeds of the fairy folk, with their coats still showing the marks of the saddles.

It's a charming legend, but has not had much study in the context of folklore, and I have been unable to locate any examples in books of Welsh folktales. All of the sources are modern books and articles about dog breeds, leading to some suggestions that such stories might be a recent creation by owners and breeders.⁹ It is difficult to trace the history of the legend, as many stories and poems originated from independent local dog magazines and now-defunct websites. Numerous tales have been circulated on the Internet and do not always include author or publication information.

A history of Corgis

Corgis are a small, short-legged breed of cattle dogs native to Wales. The name's origin is uncertain. 'Gi' is usually interpreted as the Welsh word for dog, but 'Cor' has been interpreted as deriving from the Welsh for 'to watch over', a 'cur' or working dog, or the Welsh for 'dwarf'. Into the 19th century, the dogs were known mostly as Welsh Curs.¹⁰ Mentions of 'curre' or 'cur' dogs in Welsh laws date to the 10th century. The modern Corgi is the result of careful breeding, and looks quite different from its ancestors, which ranged widely in size and appearance.¹¹ The last of the original Corgis died in 1929.¹²

There are two different modern types, the Pembroke Welsh Corgi and the Cardigan Welsh Corgi. Pembrokes have no tails; Cardigans do have tails, are slightly larger, and appear in a wider range of colours. The two breeds may not be connected at all; popular belief holds that the Pembroke is descended from the Swedish Vallhund, while the Cardigan is related to the Dachshund.¹³ Traditionally working dogs, Corgis first appeared in British dog

shows in 1925. At that time, the two lines were judged as one breed, known simply as the Welsh Corgi. This sometimes led to tension between enthusiasts of the different types. The two breeds were very different, and occasional interbreeding added to confusion.¹⁴ Not until 1934 did the English Kennel Club formally recognise the two breeds as distinct.¹⁵

Two figures, Thelma Gray and Anne G. Biddlecombe, will be particularly relevant throughout this paper. Gray, who was born in Wales, was an accomplished and influential breeder of Pembrokes and later Cardigans. She helped popularise Corgis in England. She co-founded the Welsh Corgi League (focused on the Pembroke)¹⁶ and provided the future Queen Elizabeth II's first pet Corgi.¹⁷ She originally bred Pembrokes and later turned to Cardigans as well. Anne Biddlecombe of Dorset was one of the first members of the Welsh Corgi League and served as its secretary for many years. Active as a breeder of Pembrokes from the 1930s to the 1960s, Biddlecomb successfully kept her kennel going during the difficult years of World War II.¹⁸

The Pembroke fairy saddles

By far the most famous Corgi fairy tale is Anne Biddlecombe's poem 'Corgi Fantasy'. According to the poem, long ago some Welsh children found two puppies in the woods. Although initially mistaking them for foxes, the children brought the puppies home. The children's father declared that they must be a gift from the fairies, who according to legend used such dogs to herd cattle, pull coaches, and serve as everything from playmates to battle mounts. This was the beginning of the Corgis' history with humans, and every Midsummer's Eve, the fairy warriors ride again on their canine steeds. The proof: the mark of fairy saddles still on the Pembroke's coat.

The poem first appeared in the Welsh Corgi League's first handbook in 1946. It was reprinted numerous times¹⁹ and is the single most popular narrative of fairies and Corgis.²⁰ One detail that has taken hold is the humans receiving exactly two dogs, presumably a breeding pair. There is also the list of tasks which Corgis perform for fairies, particularly serving as battle mounts. Many retellings recreate the poem so closely as to include Biddlecombe's framing device. A typical example: 'When the children took the puppies home, they were told by the villagers that the little dogs were a gift from the fairies.'²¹ In recursive fashion, it is a legend about the existence of a legend.

Some retellings do add different interpretations, such as exploring the story from the fairies' perspective.²² In another direction, a retelling titled 'The War Steeds of the Fairies' departs from the previous tales of kindly fairies to make the supernatural a perilous force. The story explains that long ago, two young brothers stumbled upon a fairy funeral. A *far darrig*²³ came to their aid and explained that they were witnessing the funeral of *Tylwyth Teg*²⁴ soldiers who had fallen in battle against the evil Gwyllion army.²⁵ Having intruded on this otherworldly gathering, the boys were in great danger, but the friendly *far darrig* helped them escape and gave them a pair of the fairies' war steeds or Corgis. The story explains

that Corgis must always wear iron or steel in their collars to keep them from reverting to 'uncontrollable and dangerous war beasts'.²⁶

A key point across all these stories is the fairy saddle, but there sometimes appears to be uncertainty on what this marking is. Biddlecombe's poem simply mentions 'saddle markings'. The marking could be colouring across the Corgis' back and sides; such a marking is also referred to as a saddle when it appears on German Shepherds.²⁷ According to various sources, the Corgi's fairy saddle appears on the withers between shoulder and neck as an outline of lighter fur;²⁸ darker fur;²⁹ fur of a different thickness and direction,³⁰ or a white mark on the chest.³¹ This doesn't seem to have been a factor in dog shows; Charles Lister-Kaye's authoritative overview in his reference work *Welsh Corgis* makes no mention of a saddle marking.

The blue merle Cardigans

Biddlecombe was not the first person to describe a fairy Corgi legend. In 1939, Thelma Gray wrote:

Corgis have, as is only to be expected in such an old breed, played a prominent part in Welsh folk lore. Legion are the tales of intelligence that can be heard round every farmhouse fireside. Some of the stories are so old that they have become mere superstitions and romances, and there are still old farm folk in the mountains who contend that the blue merles were brought by the fairies one night and have been there ever since. Others will say that all Corgis are fairy princes in disguise. Weird? Fantastic? Yes. But who will deny that there is something strange, something fey, about these quaint little dogs?³²

Gray mentioned the anecdote of fairies introducing the blue merles again in a 1962 article,³³ and it also appears in the *World Encyclopedia of Dogs* (1971), for which she was a source.³⁴

The blue merle colouring is specific to the larger, long-tailed, more sedate Cardigan Welsh Corgis. It refers to a speckled or marbled coat, black or grey in colour, usually accompanied by pale blue or mismatched eyes. They are sometimes wall-eyed, and people often wrongly assume they are blind.³⁵

The blue merle was notoriously difficult to breed. As Gray put it, 'The production of blue merle Corgis is a mystery and a lottery, which explains why they are so rare.'³⁶ The colouring actually died out before 1940, and Gray was later personally involved in reviving the blue merles through experimental breeding.³⁷

Despite the breed differences, Gray's blue merle origin myth shares the basic idea of Biddlecombe's poem: Corgis were originally a gift from the fairies, and as a result there is something special about their coat or colouring. However, Gray does not mention the evocative imagery of the Corgi as fairy horse.

Gray's anecdotes never gained as much mainstream attention as Biddlecombe's version, but have been repeated in occasional breed books.³⁸ There was also at least one longer retelling from the 1990s, which appeared in the Cardigan Welsh Corgi Club of America's handbook. In this version, fairies transform a wildflower into a blue merle Cardigan puppy for a human girl who has gained their favour.³⁹

Other Corgi tales

As previously seen, Gray mentioned an idea of Corgis being fairy princes in disguise. This is more obscure even than the blue merle Cardigan story, and the most different from the popular story of fairies riding on Corgis. However, at least one modern story echoes the concept. 'The True Origin Of Corgis' – with a tongue-in-cheek explanation that it was told by the writer's pet Corgi – explains that they were originally pwccas who became dogs in order to stay with humans in the increasingly modern world.⁴⁰

Beyond retellings of Biddlecombe's and Gray's creation myths, different stories frequently crop up in dog magazines, books and websites. These show a great deal of creativity and willingness to reinterpret the idea of a connection between fairies and Corgis.⁴¹ One origin myth written by Betsy Copeland explains how the Pembroke Corgi lost its tail. In this story, both Pembrokes and Cardigans were once fairy steeds, but one day a lazy Pembroke refused to get out of bed and carry the fairy queen. Infuriated, she stuck its tail to the ground, but the Pembroke was too stubborn to give in and pulled free, losing its tail in the process.⁴² This story is comparable to other folktales about the origin of short-tailed animals.⁴³ It was based on a tale told to the author in the mid- to late '60s by her grandmother, who was the child of Welsh immigrants.⁴⁴

Dogs in Welsh Folklore

There are plenty of recorded Welsh legends and folktales of fairy dogs. Towards the end of the 12th century, Giraldus Cambrensis recorded a story of a boy who visited a land of pygmy-like fairies. Giraldus described the fairies' lifestyle in detail, mentioning that they owned miniature horses and greyhounds.⁴⁵ In the late 19th century, a book of Welsh lore also had numerous mentions of fairy dogs. One fairy is a 'little old man' with a 'wee dog'.⁴⁶ In another story, a man encounters fairies dancing in a ring, and '[i]n the centre of the circle were a number of speckled dogs, small in size, and they too were dancing with all their might'.⁴⁷

There are also more threatening fairy hounds, typically portents of death. The *Gwyllgi*, or dog of darkness, appears in one tale as a creature with the head of a man and the body of 'a large spotted dog'.⁴⁸ Then there are the *Cwn anrwm* (dogs of hell), also known by various

other names including *cwn bendith y mamau* (dogs of the fairies). One account describes them as 'small hounds headed by a large dog'. They are often depicted as white with red ears, classic fairy colours.⁴⁹ At least one modern author has compared this to the red-and-white Pembrokes.⁵⁰ However, it's difficult to imagine Corgis gaining a reputation like that described by an elderly Glamorganshire man, who had heard of the *Cwn annwn* as horrifying 'blood-red' dogs with flaming eyes and teeth, 'dripping with gore'.⁵¹

As already seen, the image of the Corgi as fairy steed is popular among modern writers and dog owners. On its surface, the 'fairy saddle' doesn't seem too out of place for Welsh folklore. There is something similar in the Welsh term for foxgloves: '*Menyg y Tylwyth Teg*', fairies' gloves, or '*Menyg Ellyllon*', elves' gloves.⁵² However, I have yet to find any recorded tales – Welsh or otherwise – of fairies riding on dogs.

The most common fairy steed that I have found in Welsh folklore is the fairy-sized horse. As previously noted, Giraldus Cambrensis described the pygmies riding pygmy horses. Centuries later, collectors of Welsh folklore were still hearing of fairies on little horses.⁵³ These horses were sometimes specifically white in colour.⁵⁴ Tiny fairy horses also appear in stories worldwide, with examples from Ireland⁵⁵ and Spain.⁵⁶

Other steeds highlight the smallness of the miniature fairies. Medieval writer Walter Map, from Hereford near the Welsh border, wrote of a fairy-like pygmy king riding on a goat.⁵⁷ In Michael Drayton's 1628 poem *Nymphidia*, the fairies use various insects for transportation.⁵⁸ A fairy lamb with a red saddle and bridle appears in a Manx tale.⁵⁹

Odd miniature steeds appear in fairy tales about tiny people like Tom Thumb, who rides on a mouse.⁶⁰ Among other examples from around the world, parallel characters climb onto a rooster (the French *Riviere*),⁶¹ a small pig (Denmark),⁶² or a cat (India).⁶³

Small dogs seem a natural choice for a story of this kind, but as of yet, the closest I have found is the 16th-century *Flying* of Alexander Montgomerie, where the dogs and their riders are assuredly not small. A nightmarish band of witches enters the poem riding on all sorts of creatures: 'Some backward raid on brod sows, and some on black bitches'.⁶⁴ This lacks the sweetly comedic imagery of riders so tiny they can't use a horse. Still, perhaps there is something of the fairy-Corgi DNA in 18th-century fantasist Goodwin Wharton's fairies. Standing three feet tall, they ride horses the size of 'masty dogs' (mastiffs).⁶⁵

Conclusion

Although Biddlecombe's narrative of Pembroke-riding fairies has become the most well-known version, there is little to indicate any background before her poem. It bears more resemblance to British literary works such as *Nymphidia*. It is perhaps worth noting that as an early Corgi breeder, Biddlecombe would have dealt with the frustrating situation of dog shows conflating the two breeds, and would have had a strong interest in clarifying the Pembroke's specific traits. There is also the possibility that she was reacting to Thelma Gray's remarks.

Thelma Gray was Welsh and an expert on the dogs, but it is hard to tell how much she may have embellished her telling. I have yet to find any analogues for enchanted Corgis in collected Welsh legends. Rather, these stories began appearing exclusively in dog-breeding circles as the breed became popular outside Wales and as the last of the original Corgis died out. The report of a fairy Corgi story told in the 1960s deserves notice, but due to the later date, one must wonder if Biddlecombe's popular poem had affected oral storytelling.

On the other hand, some Corgis *do* resemble older folktales of otherworldly dogs. Recall the account of fairies dancing with small, speckled dogs – a description which could apply to the blue merles. One can imagine Gray hearing a remark that a spotted puppy with eerie blue eyes, whose breeding was a 'mystery' and a 'lottery', must have been left by the fairies in the night.

Regardless of its origins, the Corgi-fairy connection is now a living tradition, embraced by Corgi enthusiasts and by modern authors and artists.

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