

Manchester. Now largely owned by the National Trust, it is a place of ferns and beech woodland, ditches, banks and ancient boundary stones, of springs and tumbling waterfalls. Flint tools left by Mesolithic foragers erode out of sandy banks. Rocky plateaux, where Armada warning beacons were once lit, now serve as picnic spots with views that stretch across mile after mile of dairy pasture to the flanks of the Pennines.

But just as real are the ‘hermit’s caves’ dug in to sandstone cliffs beneath twisted tree roots and the Druid Stones, rough monoliths set in a circle in the midst of the woods. Here, too, is the massive boulder known as the Golden Stone, marking the meeting point of three ancient boundaries, and the overhanging cliffs carved with the faces of bearded wizards – all of which play their role in Garner’s atmospheric novel.

Also very real are the numerous clefts, ravines and fissures in the mineral rich sandstone from which the Edge is composed, rocky portals that lead into the bowels of the earth. For underneath the sunlit world of Alderley Edge is another dark world of claustrophobic tunnels and shafts, of vast caverns and underground pools – the nether world of Fundindelwe and Earldelving through which Colin and Susan, the heroes of Garner’s novel, crawl and struggle as they desperately seek to escape from Nastrond’s evil minions, the ‘maggot breed of Ymir’.

The Brynlow shovel

The existence of this subterranean world was no secret to local people in the 19th century: the extraction and processing of copper and cobalt from mines beneath Alderley Edge provided many of them with employment. But few archaeologists took an interest in these mines when Alan was writing his novel in the late 1950s, and nothing better illustrates this indifference than the story of the Brynlow shovel.

This enigmatic piece of ancient wood hung from a nail in what Alan Garner calls the ‘Gothic hell-hole’ of the classroom that was his infants’ school. In his last term at Manchester Grammar School, Alan saw the same object illustrated in a book he was reading – *Jottings of some Geological, Archaeological, Botanical, Ornithological and Zoological Rambles around Macclesfield* (1878). The author, Dr JD Sainter, said that it had been found among ‘old diggings’ among a heap of broken hammer stones.

Back to his infant’s school raced the ➔

