# Digital Druidry:
# An investigation into the development, nature and significance of online ritual as religious experience in contemporary British Druidry.

Jennifer Uzzell, independent researcher

Email: *j.s.uzzell@dunelm.org.uk*

## Abstract

The paper considers the experiences of religious or spiritual Druids in the UK during the lockdown of 2020-21 caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. It will examine the early attempts to deal with what was initially thought of as a very temporary situation, and how ways of meeting, communicating and performing ritual online became more sophisticated as the lockdown continued. The role of the internet in building and maintaining community will be discussed, suggesting that the rapid developments in technology brought people into Druidry who had previously been excluded or isolated. It will examine the limitations inherent in online ritual as well as the advantages, and the ways in which ritual evolved to accommodate the strengths and weaknesses of the internet. The paper will conclude that the developments that took place during the pandemic, and have continued at an unprecedented pace since, have significantly and permanently changed the way in which Druids experience ritual, community and the sense of the sacred.

**Keywords:** Druidry; Online Ritual; Covid-19; Community; Digital Religion

## *1. Introduction: What is religious Druidry in modern Britain?*

In modern Britain there are, broadly speaking, three distinct groups of people who identify themselves as 'Druids'. All of these take their inspiration from the description by Caesar and other classical authors of the Iron Age: Druids as natural philosophers, judges, arbitrators and peacemakers among the Celtic tribes (Koch, 2003). The first of these groups is built upon the fraternal model of Free Masonry (Hutton, 2011, pp. 132–133). The second group arose from the Celtic Nationalism and need for a distinct sense of identity that followed the formation of the United Kingdom in 1707. This led to the establishment of the *National Eisteddfod* in Wales as a way of preserving and encouraging the use of the Welsh language in music and poetry (Hutton, 2011, p. 266). The third group is often referred to as spiritual or religious Druidry as it is this group that has

developed Druidry into a spiritual path, with the other two forms of Druidry consciously eschewing any involvement with either politics or religion. (Uzzell, 2023, pp. 47–48), It is with the third of these groups that this paper is concerned and the term 'Druid' will be used throughout to refer to people in modern Britain for whom Druidry is a spiritual path.

Most Druids reject the idea of Druidry as a religion completely, as they associate 'religion' with the concept of hierarchy, dogma and control, which they consciously reject; furthermore, Druidry encompasses a wide range of religious identities from Pagan to Christian. Many Druids prefer to understand Druidry in terms of a spiritual path, a life-style or a way of looking at the world (Uzzell, 2023, pp. 99–102). However, while they may reject the label of 'religion', modern Druidry none-the-less uses much of the same language as religion. Druids often wear robes and engage in ritual, liturgy and ceremony designed to connect them to Nature, often personified as The Goddess, or Mother Earth, and with land spirits, Ancestors, and gods. In a groundbreaking article, Mallory Nye (2000) suggested that while 'religions' have traditionally been studied as if they were bounded and monolithic, this does not, in fact accurately describe the ways in which people behave and that religion is more concerned with what people do than with what they 'believe', which is often fluid, and rarely rooted in the official teachings of any one religion. In fact, he suggested that religion operates more like a verb than a noun and that it is appropriate to describe people taking part in ritual behaviour as 'religioning'.

Phillip Shallcrass (Greywolf), the Archdruid of the British Druid Order (BDO) defines Druidry as 'What Druids do' (2023, p. 13), rather than as a set of beliefs or fixed practices, and if we look at Druidry in these terms, rooted in a shared set of ritual and ceremony, and as a common way of looking at the world rather than as a set of dogmas that people are expected to accept, then Druidry fits Nye's idea of 'religioning' very well, making it appropriate to speak of 'Religious Druidry'. It is of course, an oversimplification to speak of modern British Druids as a single unified group. Druids may be members of one or more orders, each of which has a slightly different 'flavour' and way of thinking; or they may be solitary practitioners. The largest Druid order in Britain is the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD) which has its origins in the Universal Bond. This was a spiritual group that was active at the turn of the twentieth century and was influenced by contemporary occult organisations such as the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Movement. OBOD Druidry tends to draw on psychotherapeutic ideas and methods in its teachings and has a global outlook, with members all over the world. The British

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

Druid Order (BDO) by comparison seeks to reconnect to the ancient ancestral shamanistic religions of pre-Christian Britain[1]. Both OBOD and the BDO offer correspondence courses for members. The Druid Network (TDN), by comparison, does not publish correspondence courses but seeks to provide a free resource for people wanting to find out about Druidry on its website. TDN gained charitable status as a religion in 2010; the only Druid order to have done so. The Anglesey Druid Order (ADO) is unique in that it carries out much of its ritual in Welsh and is deeply rooted in the mythology and landscape of Anglesey. Druids see themselves as people who are deeply connected to nature and the Ancestors, who may venerate gods or spirits and may believe in the Otherworld. They are concerned with creativity and the *Awen*[2] through the Bardic arts of music, poetry and storytelling, as well as with learning, wisdom and scholarship, and the quest for social justice.

This paper is concerned with the ways in which Druids adapted their usual ceremonies and ritual activities during the Covid-19 lockdown so that they could be conducted online. I will argue that initially, in the early days of the lockdown, Druids simply tried to replicate the rituals that they usually performed together in a virtual setting, with varying degrees of success, due to the limitations of the technology. However, as time passed, and Druid groups gained more experience of what could and could not be achieved online, a new form of praxis and ritual awareness started to develop, which took advantage of the unprecedented speed with which new communication technologies were developing. This trend has continued in the post-Covid world alongside a return to face to face ceremony in a way that has deepened and enriched Druid ritual experience and ultimately led to a new way of 'doing Druidry'. In order to understand the various ways in which Druids sought to adapt their rituals to an online setting it is first necessary to examine what Druid ritual and other communal activity looks like under more usual circumstances. In the next section I will describe a typical OBOD ritual, as well as the thinking and intention behind it, as well as a brief look at the Druid camps and festivals that would take place during a typical year.

[1] Importantly, the BDO does not claim an unbroken line of tradition back to the Iron Age Druids but does draw influence from what can be known of them and seeks to connect to the landscape and spirits in a similar way them.

[2] *Awen* is a Welsh word, which can be broadly translated as 'flowing'. It is used in Druidry to describe poetic or creative inspiration, which can be seen as having an otherworldly source.

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

## *2. Creating sacred space: Druid communal ritual*

Many Druids belong to a local Grove or Seed Group[3], which may meet socially, and also hold ceremonies to celebrate the seasonal festivals of the Wheel of the Year[4], and, often, the full moon, where the central concern of the ritual is likely to be with peace. Meetings are usually held outside where possible, and while some are restricted to members of the order concerned, many are open to anyone who is interested and who comes in goodwill.

One example of a typical OBOD ceremony that I attended prior to lockdown was held by the Coventina Grove in the North of England and took place at Dilston Physic Garden which the group had permission to use and in which they had constructed a circle, marked out with small stones and suitable for a group of around thirty participants. This particular ceremony was to celebrate the festival of Samhain[5]. Having met in a wooden building on the site prior to the ceremony for a short talk and meditation, participants donned their ritual robes as the light faded and processed to the circle. A small fire had been lit in the centre and the Druids entered the circle, walking in a 'deosil' direction (with the sun, or clockwise) pausing in the East to give a salutation to the sun. The Herald then announced the start of the ceremony. Those present took three deep breaths, thinking of their connection with the land, the sea, and the sky. These are a recurring feature of Celtic cosmology, on which oaths were often sworn according to Classical authors, and they continue to feature prominently in the Medieval sources of Wales and Ireland (MacLeod, 2018). For many, these reflect the celestial or heavenly realm, the earth on which humans live, and the Otherworld or Underworld, represented by the sea.[6] Following this, the Druid tasked as the Peace giver crossed the circle to face each of the four directions, declaring 'May there be peace in the North' repeated for each

[3] A 'Seed Group' within OBOD can be formed by any member, while a Grove must contain at least two members at the Druid grade.
[4] The Wheel of the Year is a system of eight seasonal festivals that is celebrated my many modern Pagan traditions. While each of the individual festivals is ancient, the Wheel of the Year itself was first introduced into Wicca and Druidry in the 1950s.
[5] Samhain is one of the Wheel of the Year festivals, which falls at around the time of Hallowe'en. In Druidry and other forms of Paganism it is associated with the honouring of Ancestors, both ancient and recently departed.
[6] In Medieval Irish sources the place of the dead was often associated with an island in the west, and Manannan Mac Lir, a deity associated with the sea, also functions as a psychopomp.

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

direction. Finally, all present responded, 'May there be peace throughout the whole world'.[7]

Following this, those present united in saying the Druid Prayer, given below, which is used in most Druid ceremonies, and which embodies concerns often espoused by modern Druids, such as social justice.

*Grant, O Spirit/Great Spirit/God(s)/Goddess(es), thy protection,*
*and in protection, strength,*
*And in strength, understanding,*
*And in understanding, knowledge,*
*And in knowledge, the knowledge of justice,*
*And in the knowledge of justice, the love of it,*
*And in the love of it, the love of all existences,*
*and in the love of all existences,*
*The love of Spirit/Great Spirit/God(s)/Goddess(es) and all goodness.*

The word '*Awen*' was then chanted three times, with the voices of participants 'cascading' around the circle; people joining in in turn so that there is a 'wave' of sound moving around the circle. The next part of the ritual is common to many forms of Paganism. A circle was cast by being traced in the air in a deosil direction using a sword although a staff or wand is also often used. The circle was then blessed with water and fire, carried around the circle and offered to each participant. A participant standing in each of the cardinal directions then 'called the Quarters', invoking the characteristics traditionally associated with each direction and asking for their blessings on the ceremony. The spirits of the local place were also greeted and invited to be present during the ceremony. In OBOD, the North is usually associated with the element of earth and so the physical world and the senses, the Midwinter and Midnight and, often, the dead. The East is associated with dawn, the spring, the element of air and the intellect; South is associated with midday, summer, the element of fire and ambition or passion, and the West is associated with twilight, the autumn, the element of water and the emotions. It may also,

[7] This takes a slightly different form in other orders, most notably the Anglesey Druid Order, where this is done in Welsh three times. In translation the first of these is: 'The truth against the world, is there peace?' The response each time is '*Heddwch*' which goes beyond the English noun 'peace' being closer in translation to 'May there be peace' or 'there will be peace'.

for some, be associated with the dead. There are also particular animals associated with the Quarters, the Bear of the starry heavens in the North; the Hawk of Dawn in the East; the Stag in the heat of the chase in the South and the Salmon of Wisdom[8] in the West.

Following this, the main business of the ritual began. On this occasion, the Ancestors were invited to join the living in the circle, 'entering' though a gate formed in the Northwest. People then spent some time in their company, eating bread dipped in salt and honey and drinking wine. The remainder of the food and drink was given as an offering to the dead by being placed in the central fire. Participants were reminded of the debt of gratitude owed to those who had gone before, and the importance of being worthy ancestors to those still to come. Time was given for people to remember anyone that they had lost, particularly during the past year and then a Druid wearing a veil and representing the Cailleach[9] walked around the circle in silence taking a slip of paper from participants on which they had written things that they wished to leave behind in the coming year. These were placed into a cauldron before being burnt in the central fire. Finally, the Ancestors were invited to leave, returning to the Otherworld with love and thanks. The ceremony took place in increasing darkness and the dramatic and emotional impact was significant. There was a hush and a sense of anxious expectation as the Ancestors were invited into the circle and the 'Cailleach' was an imposing presence.
The ceremony now entered its final stage, with the Druids present joining hands to say the Druid Oath:

> *We swear by peace and love to stand, heart to heart and hand in hand.*
> *Mark, Oh Spirits, and hear us now, confirming this, our sacred vow.*

This was repeated three times, followed by more cascading *Awens*. The ceremony was then drawn to a close with the words:

> *It is the hour of recall. As the fire dies down let it be relit in our hearts.*
> *May memory hold what eye and ear have gained.*

[8] The salmon is associated with wisdom in a number of Medieval stories from Wales and Ireland from which Druids draw inspiration.
[9] The Cailleach is a figure from Scottish and Irish mythology, typically seen as an old woman who represents winter and death.

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

The circle was then uncast in the opposite direction to that in which it was cast (widdershins, or anti-clockwise) and the Quarters thanked and closed. The ceremony closed with the words:

> *I declare this ceremony to be closed in the apparent world.*
>
> *May its inspiration continue within our beings.*

The participants then returned to the wooden building where they spent some social time and shared food. While most Druid ritual follows this basic pattern, there are some small variations between the different orders, or purely due personal preference. For example, some Druids prefer not to use a sword in ritual as they believe this does not fit with the centrality of peace to Druid thought. There are also variations in the words used in the ritual. Some groups might address particular deities (generally from a Celtic pantheon) during the ritual while others do not. Many groups use the framing ritual described above but might write the specific content used for the seasonal rituals so that there is variety each year.

In the UK, almost all Druidic ceremony takes place within a circle cast for the purpose. This is regarded as a sacred space, removed from the quotidian world. In some groups within both Druidry and wider Paganism the circle is seen as 'between the worlds' or 'between past and future'. The degree to which the circle is believed to be literally removed from the 'ordinary' world and located in an 'other' or 'inner' world will vary from Druid to Druid. For many, perhaps in contrast to Wicca, the circle is very much located in the physical world, being connected to the physical landscape in which it is set, as well as to the other beings in the area, human and otherwise. For many, the demarcation of the circle is not so much intended for protection, or to remove it from the apparent world, as to create a psychological 'head space' in which people can detach themselves from everyday concerns and worries and focus on the ceremony.

What is clear, regardless of the interpretation, is that the circle is intended to function as liminal space. Van Gennep (1904) proposed that many rituals involving a change of status involved three stages: a period of separation; a liminal 'in between' period and a period of reintegration to society with a changed status. The 'liminal' is taken from the Latin *limen*. Meaning a threshold. The liminal phase was further explored and developed by Victor Turner, who argued that the phase is defined by being in the condition of being

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

neither one thing or the other, 'betwixt and between' as he puts it (1967). The idea has since been extended in popular usage to refer to any occasion or space that can be seen as 'neither one thing nor another' out of step with the quotidian, and in which transformation can take place. Many Druids self-consciously use the language of liminality to describe what they are doing when they create ritual sacred space, for example through the casting of a circle; and it is clear that for many, the ritual circle represents a liminal time and space in which the extraordinary is to be expected, and the usual rules, particularly with regard to interaction with the 'other' are suspended or re-written.

This somewhat lengthy description of normative Druidic ritual has been necessary in order to address the question of what happens when these rituals are taken out of the 'real' world and into a space that exists exclusively online; a new and entirely different kind of 'liminal space'. Before turning to that question, we will consider another kind of 'sacred space' in which Druids may experience the other or the divine in a particularly intense way.

## *3. Sacred 'tribal' spaces*

In addition to their personal practices or activities with a local grove, many Druids also attend national camps or festivals. These may be run by particular orders (such as the White Horse Camps which were, for many years, run by OBOD) or might be more generic, such as the annual Druid Camp in Gloucestershire. Even where camps are run by a specific Druid order, they tend to be open to all Druids and usually to others with a genuine and respectful interest.

In his discussion of Druid festivals and camps in the early years of this century, Letcher suggests that it is in such spaces that 'Druidry' is created for many modern practitioners: 'It is through these gatherings, more than through the correspondence courses, that the sense of a Druidic identity is created; it is where vernacular Druidry emerges' (Letcher 2001, p.45). Events such as these could be understood in terms of liminal space-time, in which people spend time away from the quotidian in ways that allow them to view both their 'everyday' selves and their assumptions about the world from a distance that allows for the possibility of change. Letcher mentions that such occasions may be deeply emotional as people 'come out' as Pagan for the first time, meet people they would not usually come into contact with, and perhaps even experience camping and outdoor life

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

in a way that they have not done before. Some people even meet their life partners at such events. Such camps 'enable or encourage the sort of experimentation with identity characteristic of the neo-tribe (Maffesoli, 1996), and more specifically of alternative spiritualities.' And allow people to 'engage in dialogues with other ways of being and free themselves, if only temporarily, from established patterns.' (Letcher 2001, p.135, p.141).

It could, however, be questioned whether such events are truly liminal. Turner himself argued that truly liminal states are possible only in traditional societies. Post-Industrial Western societies rather experience 'liminoid' events that are more properly categorised as 'leisure', a concept that is unique to the Industrialised West. Such events, which might include music festivals, sporting events and even holidays, do indeed represent time spent outside the societal norm, but differ from liminal times and spaces in that they do not involve a change in status, and are not truly transformational of either individuals or society (Turner, 1974). The question then, is one of the extent to which Druid camps and large-scale gatherings could be said to be genuinely transformative. While sporting events or music festivals might succeed in creating a feeling of communitas (Turner, 1996, p. 132), they differ from Druidic festivals in that they lack a spiritual and ritual component. Druid gatherings engage with questions of identity and ontology through discussion and through performative ritual. This allows the potential for a truly transformative element.

Douglas Ezzy has made a study of an Australian Pagan festival which deliberately set out to be uncomfortable and provocative in the ways in which it used ritual to force participants to engage with issues relating to both their sexuality and their mortality. Through confrontation of their fears and a direct engagement with issues that are often avoided in 'normal' society, many reported that they had experienced genuine transformation that impacted their lives and their sense of identity long after the end of the camp (Ezzy, 2014). While British Druid gatherings are generally (although not always) less provocative than this, the intensive engagement with ceremony and, often, ritual drama, can have an equally transformative effect, making such events more complex than simple 'leisure' activities. Also, there is often a strong ecological element involved in the teaching and ritualising, which in some cases leads to Druids engaging in 'Green' politics or environmental protest and campaigning, meaning that the 'ripple' effect spreading out from such events could be seen to have, over time and even if only on a small scale, a

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

transformative effect within wider society. For these reasons, I would suggest that it would not be unreasonable to see these events as genuinely liminal.

Letcher uses the term 'heterotopic' to describe Druidic gatherings (Letcher 2001, p.131). 'Heterotopia' is a word first used by Foucault to describe places that are 'other' to the norm. They are disturbing, countercultural and transformative (Foucault, 2001). To Foucault such places are often those to which the 'undesirable' elements of normal society are consigned; places such as prisons and brothels. It is not in quite this sense that Letcher uses the term, but more in the sense of spaces that are 'dangerous' to established society in that they allow free thinking that is unconstrained, or at least less constrained by societal norms. This is, I think, less true now than it was when Letcher's research was carried out in the late 90s; many of the same people still attend the events, but they are now older, and often more resigned to conventional lifestyles. However, there is still a strong current of radical politics, counter cultural thinking and a refusal to accept the norms of Neoliberal Capitalism, which means that the term heterotopic continues to be at least somewhat appropriate. Letcher further associates the idea of the heterotopic with Hakim Bey's concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ). These are times and spaces outside of the quotidian that are, by their very nature, acts of rebellion against the status quo. Bey also refers to them as 'Pirate Utopias'. They represent times and spaces of 'peak experience' and are, by their very nature, transient and temporary, outside the norms and rules of society. Bey, an anarchist philosopher, suggests that change is brought about not by revolution, which historically always fails in that a repressive 'state' is restored, but by a series of TAZs in which the order can be temporarily disrupted and new ways of being experimented and 'played' with, leading to genuine and lasting transformations in individuals which can, in turn, seep into wider society (Bey, 2003).

Letcher does not fully adopt the concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone, arguing that Druid gatherings could not be described as 'autonomous' in any meaningful sense, since they are dependent on wider society for their existence, in terms of catering, electricity and other amenities. Rather, he suggests that a Druid Camp could be described in terms of a Temporary Tribal Zone, (TTZ). Thus, a single heterotopic space may contain one or more TTZs, which are ordered according to the rules and conventions of the particular neo-tribe. Within a Druid Camp there might be fewer separate TTZs than there might be at, for example, a music festival; however, there

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

might be several different orders present, each with a slightly different habitus. In addition, the leaders or organisers; the performing musicians, workshop leaders, caterers and security staff (often referred to collectively at Pagan events as 'The Dagda') may each constitute a separate TTZ.

The Camp then becomes a 'temporary spatial arrangement of a neo-tribe or neo-tribes, the 'temporary tribal zone' within the heterotopic spaces that large gatherings provide' (Letcher 2001, p.131). In this environment, he argues, strong emotional bonds and a neo-tribal identity are formed. It is difficult to envisage a situation is which the edgy and anarchic atmosphere that can be experienced at a festival could be reproduced online, but there is a sense in which it is possible to see how a TTZ might materialise under these circumstances, particularly at a time when people are becoming increasingly comfortable with online interaction and no longer find it as alienating and disorientating as they once did.

## *4. 2020: The year everything changed*

In a typical summer many British Druids would be attending various camps, gatherings, festivals and workshops; renewing and forging friendships and 'tribal' connections and taking part in rituals, discussion groups and bardic performances. The summer of 2020, however, was far from a typical summer. From March the UK, along with much of the rest of the world, was in a greater or lesser degree of lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This meant that all the events that were due to take place were either cancelled or moved online. In some ways Druids, along with other religious communities, could be said to be lucky that the pandemic happened at a time when the technology was such that it was possible to maintain a ritual and community life online; indeed, the pandemic acted as a catalyst, encouraging the rapid development and improvement of the social media platforms and conference technology that many rely on to maintain social and community connections. There were many Druidic online communities even before the onset of the pandemic, with dozens of Facebook pages and groups devoted to the various aspects of Druidry, as well as private groups for the members of various orders. For many, including those who prefer to practise alone, and those who live in areas where there are not many other Druids to connect with, these groups are their main form of community making, and friendships are formed, often across the world. In this way Druidry has become a genuinely international community.

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

During the summer of 2020, all of this, of course, continued. However, a largely new phenomenon of online events also developed, seemingly overnight. For people such as myself, living in the Northeast of England where Druidic events have always been sparse; and with limited financial resources for travel and accommodation, this had the rather counter-intuitive effect that I actually attended many more events than I would ordinarily have been able to. For me, this began at Beltane (1st May) the traditional beginning of summer. Every year, a fire festival is held at the hill of Uisneach in Ireland, where a beacon is lit on a hill to celebrate *Bealtaine* (Beltane). Traditionally people travel from all over the world to be present at the festival, but as this was not possible, the lighting of the fire was instead livestreamed on the Uisneach Facebook page (Uisneach, 2025). While this was obviously a very different experience to being there in person, it did make it possible for far more people to attend than would usually have been able to make the journey to Ireland; and as a drone was used to give a bird's eye view of the beacon, it could be said that visitors had a greater than usual sense of perspective on the event. For me personally, as one of the many who would not usually have been able to attend the event in person, there was also a great feeling of community, and of being a part of something greater than oneself, which was especially welcome at a time characterised by isolation and separation.

This sense of community within Druidry (and Paganism more widely) was maintained through much of the lockdown in a number of ways, one of the more notable being the livestream Facebook concerts held every few weeks by Damh the Bard[10], which drew audiences of up to 1,300[11]. While it is obviously not possible to see the other attendees, the 'chat' function fosters a genuine sense of community and togetherness that has been a major source of comfort for many. Since it draws a truly international audience, it also means that people who would not normally meet in person, unless very occasionally at major Druid gatherings, have the chance to interact. It is not uncommon to see people 'singing along' in the chat function, and Damh encourages this sense of togetherness, by inviting participants to imagine that they are all together in a field or marquee, and to join or raise their hands at appropriate moments. There have even been T-shirts

[10] Damh the Bard is a well-known musician within the Druidic and Pagan community having released several CDs, including retellings of the Mabinogi. He is also the current Pendragon of OBOD. https://www.paganmusic.co.uk

[11] That is, 1,300 separate Facebook accounts; the number of individuals watching will have been considerably higher.

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

produced for the 'Lockdown Tour 2020' and another for 2021, engendering, once again, a sense of communitas and of having been a part of something special.

While the feeling is clearly not the same as being at a physical Druidic musical festival, I would suggest that it does create, to some degree, a TTZ, in that there is common understanding of the world, and many people singing along to the songs even in their own homes. A 'normal' way of relating to the world is temporarily suspended and people experience themselves in ways that are more 'tribal' and anti-establishment, as many of the songs are highly critical of a Western materialist understanding of the world. Even now, several years after the last lockdown, the monthly concerts continue, now on You Tube as well, and with a Patreon group that meets regularly. For many, these events are a significant part of what constitutes their Druidic identity, and some have even come into Druidry because of them. This time also saw experimentation with the ways in which the internet could bring Druids together, with online talks, story-telling events and conferences online within Druidry and the 'Druid-adjacent' communities during the summer, including the 'Women in Druidry online conference'[12]. As this would usually have been held in America, moving it to an online format using Zoom enabled a far broader range of people to attend than would ordinarily have been the case, as well as facilitating many speakers from the UK.

## *5. Cyber space as sacred space?*

As well as more conventional events such as these, many Druids also experimented with various ways of conducting ritual online. One OBOD Druid Grove did this during the first lockdown by uploading separate short videos to the members' Facebook page to mark the seasonal festivals. There was a variety of content including members reading poetry and playing instruments as well as the usual leader of the group conducting the ritual in his garden filmed by his wife. This was not entirely successful as there were technical issues uploading many of the videos so that they did not appear at the advertised time, causing some stress and interrupting the flow of the event, meaning that not everyone could watch and 'be together' at the same time as was the original intention. Having said this, it did allow the community to come together on the same evening as usual, and as members were widely geographically dispersed, the online aspect allowed people to 'be there' who would not otherwise have been due to the distances

[12] http://ynysafallon.com/women-in-druidry-conference-2020

involved; and so, attendance at the seasonal celebrations actually increased. Other groves used different tactics. For example, the *Anderida Gorsedd*, led by Damh the Bard and his wife, Cerri Lee, encouraged members to perform the ritual at the same time, having adapted it to be more easily carried out by individuals. Members then posted photos of what they had done to the members' Facebook page, meaning that members were alone for the rituals but maintained a feeling of community and togetherness.

As the pandemic restrictions extended beyond initial expectations, however, there was a move towards conducting more interactive rituals using platforms such as Zoom, allowing participants to see and speak to each other in real time. My own first experience of such a ritual came at Samhain of 2020, when I took part in an online ceremony using the OBOD liturgy for the Samhain ritual with 'the Grove of the Aether'. This grove was formed during lockdown with the express purpose of taking advantage of the newly developed technology to allow people who did not live close to other Druid groups, as well as those who could not leave their houses due to the Covid restrictions, to take part in group ritual. Members may belong to any Druid order or none, so long as they are in sympathy with the aims and values of OBOD; and they come from all over the world, forming what may well be one of the first international Druid groves. Whilst it was formed as a direct consequence of the global lockdown and need for people to come together online rather than in person, there are currently no plans to wind the group down, and the Grove of the Aether continues to hold seasonal rituals online and has recently started holding a social 'moot' in between ceremonies, to allow members to chat and share songs, poems and even knitting projects. The intention is that this, and other online groves will continue to allow Druids who would not otherwise be able to do so easily to take part in group rituals.

The format of the ritual was that everyone joined with camera and audio to say hello (there were around 22 participants at the first ritual I attended) and then those who were not taking an active part muted themselves and turned off their cameras in order to reduce distractions and free up band width. Participants had been invited to bring wine, bread, salt and honey. Roles had been assigned in advance to different members, so that different people called each of the Quarters, and gave peace to the directions. When someone was speaking, their face filled the screen. At the appropriate time, participants were invited to eat and drink the offerings they had brought, and when the *Awens* were chanted, everyone was unmuted, and a cascading sequence of three *Awens*

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

was chanted by all present. This was a very different experience to being physically together, particularly with the chanting, as online platforms are not good at broadcasting several voices at once; however, the feeling of chanting together was a very powerful one, and it served to enhance the experience of the ceremony. Also, the fact that people could eat and drink 'together' was a powerful experience, even though there was no actual sharing of food. The inclusion of physical, sensual activities such as lighting candles, eating and drinking enabled a strong feeling of community and belonging and made the ritual itself feel more intimate and powerful. Following the closing of the ceremony, everyone's camera was turned back on, and a traditional *Eisteddfod* was held, with participants volunteering to perform a piece of music, or a poem. Finally, there was a short period of chat before the meeting was ended, itself a very alien feeling as usually following a ceremony people will hang around chatting for quite a while, and drift away over gradually, so the somewhat abrupt ending of the meeting when the screen goes blank can feel like quite a shock.

The circle was cast and uncast by a participant using a sword, who passed it around himself. It is also worthy of note, that there was no correlation between the people calling each of the Quarters and their geographical location. (That is, the person who called the North was not necessarily the most northern person there. Also, one of the Quarters was called by someone participating from America.) This means that the 'circle' that was cast had no existence at all in 'real' space but existed purely in 'cyberspace' and in the minds and imaginations of those 'present'.

This idea of imagined 'space' in the context of online ceremony is also described by Damh the Bard in his blog post *A Different Kind of Samhain* in which he describes the first time the *Anderida Gorsedd* used Zoom to hold a ritual (Smith 2020). He explains how he asked people to close their eyes and imagine themselves in their usual ritual setting. When he cast the circle, he asked them to 'feel' him walking behind them with the sword, and to imagine and describe the view towards each of the Quarters as they were called. In this way, there was a deliberate attempt to connect those present, in imagination at least, to the physical space of the usual ritual site beneath the Long Man of Wilmington. The connection to this specific ritual space may be particularly important since it is an established ancient and magical space in its own right.[13] In these ways I would argue that the ritual space created in cyber space during online rituals using Zoom and other similar

[13] While the actual age of the Long Man is contested, there is a sense in which this is irrelevant to the affective sense of connection to a re-imagined past that is felt by many who visit the site.

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

platforms constitutes a heterotopic space in a similar way to the physical spaces created during face-to-face rituals and in festival areas discussed above, although the emotional experience is very different to being physically in a communal space. In some cases, it might not go too far to suggest that online spaces might constitute a TTZ in that the participants will have ritual tools or altars in their rooms or backgrounds that are familiar to the neo-tribe and modes of speech and 'tribal' conventions are used that cumulatively serve to designate the virtual area as tribal space.

## *6. A virtual Otherworld?*

Sometimes, the 'sacralising' of online space goes even further than the invitation to imagine a known physical space. In June of 2020, Philip Carr-Gomm stepped down as Chosen Chief of OBOD after 35 years, and a new Chosen Chief, Eimear Burke was invested. The intention was to have a ceremony of investiture at the OBOD Summer Gathering in 2020 which was to be held in Glastonbury. Obviously, this had to be cancelled. The decision was made to go ahead with the investiture ceremony as an online event. The format chosen was a live Facebook streaming, in audio only, of a pre-recorded ceremony involving the outgoing and incoming Chosen Chiefs, the Scribe and the Pendragon of OBOD. While the recording remains available, and is embedded in the OBOD website[14], the intention was for all members who were able to tune in and so 'be present' at the same time. The main participants, even though their parts had been pre-recorded, were also present at the appointed time, so that the Order was gathered in a virtual space, even though they could not see or hear each other. Members were invited to prepare as they usually would for meditation or practice, and to close their eyes during the ceremony and so to imagine themselves meeting with other members from across the world in an 'Inner Grove'.

The Inner Grove as a meditative tool is well established within OBOD and is often used in the weekly 'Tea with a Druid' online meditations led by Philip Carr-Gomm and other members of OBOD (Tea with a Druid, n.d). Hence the 'Inner Grove' as a tool for meditation is a practice with which many OBOD Druids are familiar and comfortable. The investiture ceremony, therefore, operated on one level as an online ritual, and on

[14] The recording of the ceremony can be accessed here: https://druidry.org/people/eimear-burke

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

another as a collective meditation designed to bring the members together in a sacred space conceptualised as an 'Inner Grove,' which for many is conceived as a 'place' accessible to all OBOD Druids and having at least as much reality as the apparent and material world. Members were invited to meet and witness the transfer of leadership, which took place in a space that was both 'virtual' in the sense of occurring online, and liminal in the sense of being outside of everyday time and space, existing, for many, in an inner plane that is truly 'Other'. The purpose of the ritual was to bring about a very real transformation within the Order, making the space truly liminal in the sense that Turner intended.

The ceremony took place using the usual Druidic format, with those 'present' invited to witness the casting of the circle and to join in with the Druid Prayer and Oath, and with the chanting of the *Awens*. It could be argued that this format, which has a strong esoteric component, holds more emotional and experiential power than the physical ceremony would have had, had it been able to go ahead. It also has more permanence in the sense that it remains accessible online as a resource to which members can return, and which will become a part of the history of the Order. It can be seen then, that during the pandemic, the Druid, as well as the wider Pagan communities innovated in imaginative and creative ways to continue to perform ritual online. The extent to which this was successful could be debated. In one sense, the online rituals allowed communities to continue to meet, so reducing loneliness and isolation. They also allowed for larger and more geographically dispersed groups to meet, allowing for international conferences and rituals. Rituals became more inclusive as the time and expense of travelling to a physical site were dispensed with, as well as potential accessibility issues in sites that were uneven or difficult to reach.

## *7. Problems with religious experience online*

Online rituals, while they may be a means of genuine religious experience for some, are not without their problems. Moving rituals online reduced accessibility for some who did not have the resources or technical ability to access them. Online rituals also, proved difficult for those who were sight or hearing impaired. In many ways, the online rituals worked well to create a sense of shared sacred space, and for activities such as meditation, guided visualisation, and liturgical ritual. However, they worked less well for the more embodied elements such as drumming, singing or chanting. Cascading *Awens*

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

do not work well online as the technology is designed to project a single voice or sound at a time. Sensory elements that also form an important part of the 'embodied knowing' that is central to the experience of ritual (Scrutton, 2018) are also missing from virtual events. For example, feeling the heat of the fire, hearing the noise of the wind or local wildlife, smelling the incense, tasting mead or other food or drink and physical contact with other Druids are intrinsic parts of most Druid ceremonies and are, of necessity, missing from the online experience.

> It is not just the translation of 3D physicality to 2D screen communication that play a part in the experience of disappointment in zoom for ritual as opposed to meditation and learning etc. The psychical chemistry of being present, in all sensual modes plays a big part, with people reporting missing varied aspects of the physical closeness of a circle. Perhaps participants also miss the subconscious triggers they have internalised to the smells and feel of a group ritual, a tribal feel of belonging and familiarity with both the people and the magic (Harrington, 2021).

Furthermore, many Druidic rituals are highly performative and theatrical. Participants may take on the role of deities for different seasonal rites; there is movement within and around the Circle, with 'gateways' often being formed in a certain direction for people to pass through. Tokens are given to participants to represent the time of year, such as mistletoe at the Winter Solstice or the symbolic action of planting, watering and blessing a seed at the Spring Equinox. In some ceremonies, there is a moment of intimate and personal communication between each person present and a Druid who represents or embodies (depending on personal interpretation) a divinity. This sense of intimacy and immediate embodied involvement is impossible to replicate virtually and for many, this is a fatal flaw in online ritual.

Another issue is that for some Druids, a virtual space can never replace the immediacy and immanent divinity of the natural world. One of the defining features of Druidry is the intention to make a connection with the local landscape and its spirits. It is difficult to see how this could be achieved online. In some of the ceremonies I have attended individual participants have taken their mobile phones or laptops outside in an attempt to feel more connected to place, but there are obvious limitations to this, as signals are often weak, and even when it works well, only one member of the group is grounded in any particular place. For some Druids the use of technology itself is problematic, as the

technological world that gives rise to mobile phones and computers is, in itself corrupt and connected to the reductionist, capitalist worldview that they seek to resist.

## *8. Do online rituals work?*

Another question that Pagans could usefully ask about ritual conducted online is 'Does it work?' What it means for a ritual to 'work' will vary from person to person and from group to group. Within Wicca and Ceremonial Magic, the concept of the *egregore* is widespread. An *egregore* is a spiritual construct arising from a group project or mind. For many, it is a conscious being with agency and the power to bring about a desired effect, and there has been some discussion among practitioners as to whether an *egregore* can be created by a group working online. The *egregore* is an idea that is less common in Druidry, although it is not absent; however, much Druid ritual is concerned with contacting non-human intelligences, be they Ancestors, local spirits or wights, or gods and deities. The question could therefore be raised as to whether these connections can be effectively made online. In the Samhain ritual that I attended, for example, the Ancestors were invited to be present in the circle with the participants and to eat and drink with them. For those who believe that this connection between the living and the dead is established during the Samhain ritual in more than a purely symbolic way, the question of whether the connection can be made in an online ceremony where there is no physical circle for the dead to enter is a pressing one. Ritual and, for some, magic, are constructed using the body, the spirit and the mind. The mind is certainly present in online rituals but the extent to which body and spirit are involved could be, and no doubt will be debated in decades to come. To some extent the effectiveness of online ritual will be decided by its results: does a ritual designed to effect healing, physical or mental, or to protect an area of landscape from the threat of development, or to influence a decision of government have the desired effect? It is far too early for a consensus on questions such as these to have been reached within Pagan communities and debate is likely to be ongoing in the coming months and years. Certainly, no questions have been raised within OBOD over the legitimacy of Eimear Burke's initiation as Chosen Chief because it happened in virtual online space (Although it was 'confirmed' at the next face to face OBOD meeting at the Summer Gathering of 2022).

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

## *9. Conclusion*

Between August 2020 and September 2021, Manchester Metropolitan University conducted research into the impact that moving ritual onto an online setting was having on a variety of religious communities.[15] Overwhelmingly, the impact was felt to be negative with religious communities feeling the loss of face-to-face contact intensely. I would argue that while this was as true for Druid communities as for any other, pre-existing Druid practices such as guided meditation, and the concept of liminal space and an 'Inner Grove that Druids seek out as a part of their regular spiritual practice have allowed them to engage in online space as sacred and liminal space in a particularly effective way.

For Letcher, writing in 2001, modern Druidry is performed and constructed in physical heterotopic space, such as camps and festivals (Letcher 2001, p.45). While there is a sense in which this remains true, it is also the case in a world emerging from a pandemic that has led to a surge in technology and a huge increase in online ritual and community that Druidry, perhaps increasingly, will be performed and constructed in heterotopic spaces that exist only online. In many ways, the online rituals that have developed over the course of the pandemic have served to conflate the ideas of online 'cyberspace' with liminal 'inner' space that could be equated for many with the Otherworld, or an alternative plane of reality, which is of great importance in many Paganisms as well as to many Druids (Greenwood, 2000).[16] Whilst there is a sense in which this has been true for Pagans since the development of the internet, the changes in technology and the increased familiarity with using social media platforms to create ritual space during the Covid-19 pandemic represent a paradigm shift in the concept of sacred and ritual space, and indeed, in the concept of the Otherworld and what it means to be 'between the worlds' that merits significant future research.

It remains to be seen to what extent the huge surge towards online ritual will continue to influence the Pagan and Druid world in the years and decades following the pandemic. The technology enabling such events will continue to develop, although perhaps not at

[15] British Ritual Innovation under Covid 19(BRIC-19)

https://www.mmu.ac.uk/about-us/faculties/arts-humanities/research/projects/bric-19 [Accessed 12/5/25]

[16] Druids use many names for this concept, including *Annwn*, *Tir Na Nog* and the Summer Lands, as well as the Otherworld, but the concept remains important.

quite such a bewildering speed. The Covid virus will remain a part of everyday life for decades to come, and for some people it will be a long time before they feel confident again in a crowd, or sharing food in a ritual, if, indeed, they ever do. It seems reasonable to suppose, therefore, that what it means to engage in Druidry, and to experience the 'other' through it, will be permanently changed by the events of 2020 and 2021. This was the subject of an (online) discussion hosted by the Pagan Phoenix Southwest conference, usually held near Bude in Cornwall, but, like everything else, moved online in March of 2021. The conference organisers hosted a number of Zoom panels, which were then uploaded to You Tube. One of these was a discussion about the future of ritual in a post-pandemic world and featured well known Druids Damh the Bard, Cerri Lee, Penny Billington and Kristoffer Hughes. One of the issues to be raised was that of inclusion.

As discussed above, many people have been able to attend rituals and events online that would usually have been impossible for them due to cost or distance. Penny Billington pointed out that it would be irresponsible, if not immoral of the Druidic community to return to a situation where people who had, briefly, been included were once again marginalised. This meant, she thought, a way of ensuring events that were either entirely online, as well as face to face events; or events that were a mixture of face to face and live. There was also a discussion about the effectiveness and limitations of online ritual, with the interesting point being made that for a grove that usually uses a particular sacred space for ritual (such as the Long Man of Wilmington) there is a connection between the grove and that site and its spirits. Where ritual is to be online, it was suggested that participants visit the site beforehand (separately rather than together) to reinforce that connection, and to explain to the land what was going on. In this way, so far as possible, the connection can be maintained.

There was an acknowledgement that those responsible for organizing rituals need to be aware that people will feel safe at different times with some very eager to get back to the full physicality of hugging, holding hands and sharing food, while others will still be nervous of meeting in groups for a long time. Rituals would therefore need to be organised sensitively and with a care not to exclude those who do not feel comfortable. Damh the Bard suggested that changes might be necessary for some time to come, perhaps dispensing with elements such as holding hands or passing round a drinking horn or chalice, and that perhaps new elements could be added such as people bringing their own picnic food so that communal eating was still an option. There was also an

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

awareness that there would be an impact on the *Eisteddfod* that typically followed Druid ritual, as people might not be comfortable with singing or chanting together in a close group, even outdoors. Time will tell how far reaching and long lasting such changes might be. As Damh the Bard pointed out, from an animist perspective shared by many Druids, the virus is a living being that is now a permanent part of the network of relationships that Druids form with the wider than human world, and Druids must find ways to live alongside it (*Phoenix Conversations Druidry and the Pandemic*, 2021).

The online Druid communities continue to evolve and develop. In 2024, OBOD conducted the Mt Haemus Conference[17] for the first time as a combination of online and in person events. The face-to-face conference was held in Glastonbury in October, but there were two online events earlier in the year, which allowed scholars from America and elsewhere to present their papers and for members to discuss them. Also in 2024 OBOD launched The Hearth, an online platform that allows members to meet, to form groups and virtual seed groups and groves, to view online live content such as Tea with a Druid and access Touchstone, the Order's journal. The Hearth continues to develop, with Damh the Bard holding a Zoom meeting following 'Tea with a Druid' where members can meet and chat.

The technology that supports The Hearth would have been unthinkable for an organisation such as OBOD even a few years ago, and has, I suggest, created a 'Tribal Zone' in which to some extent the Inner Grove can come to have a substantial and real presence allowing the virtual and liminal spaces to become almost indistinguishable. It is also probable that as the technology develops even further, and as younger generations come into Druidry, having spent their lives being at home and comfortable in virtual spaces, online rituals will develop in new directions. Already groups are developing strategies for overcoming the limitations of online ritual, with, for example, all participants lighting the same incense or putting the same picture of a sacred space into their background. Meeting online will never be the same as meeting in the same physical space, but as a new 'grammar' of ritual develops around the unique environment of the internet it may be that a new way of experiencing the divine, and a new way of 'Being Druid' begins to emerge.

[17] Every year, OBOD offers a bursary to a scholar to produce an academic paper on a subject related to Druidry. These are presented at a conference every four years and published as a bound volume every eight years.

  **ISSN: 2057-2301**

**References**

Bey, H. (2003) *T.A.Z: the temporary autonomous zone, ontological anarchy, poetic terrorism.* 2nd rev. ed. New York: Autonomedia.

Ezzy, D. (2014) *Sex, death and witchcraft: a contemporary Pagan festival.* London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Foucault, M. (2001) *The order of things: archaeology of the human sciences.* London: Routledge.

Greenwood, S. (2000) *Magic, witchcraft and the Otherworld: an anthropology.* Oxford; New York: Berg 3PL.

Harrington, M. (2021) 'Zooming to the sabbat: Wiccan adaptation of video conferencing for virtual ritual in 2020', in. *17th Conference on current Pagans studies: brave new world: contemporary Paganisms during extreme change,* Claremont Graduate University CA. Available at: https://www.paganconference.com/event-schedule.html (Accessed: 5 March 2021).

Hutton, R. (2011) *Blood and mistletoe: the history of the Druids in Britain*. Reprint ed. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

Koch, J.T. (2003) *The Celtic heroic age: literary sources for ancient Celtic Europe and early Ireland and Wales*. 4th Rev edn. J. Carey (ed.). Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, U.S.

Letcher, A.J. (2001) *The role of the bard in contemporary Pagan movements.* Ph.D. thesis University of Southampton. Available at:

http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?did=1&uin=uk.bl.ethos.393344 (Accessed: 15 February 2016).

MacLeod, S.P. (2018) *Celtic cosmology and the Otherworld: mythic origins, sovereignty and liminality*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland.

Maffesoli, M. (1996) *The time of the tribes: the decline of individualism in mass society*. London; (Theory, culture & society) Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.

Nye, M. (2000) 'Religion, post-religionism, and religioning: religious studies and contemporary cultural debates', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*,

12(1–4), pp. 447–476. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1163/157006800X00300.

*Phoenix Conversations…Druidry and the pandemic* (2021). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLRbFOgmMIM (Accessed: 19 March 2021).

Scrutton, A.P. (2018) 'Grief, ritual and experiential knowledge: a philosophical perspective', in D. Klass and E.M. Steffen (eds) *Continuing Bonds in Bereavement: New Directions for Research and Practice pp. 214-226*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Shallcrass, P. (2023) *Druidry: a practical & inspirational guide*. Devizes: Pretanic Press.

Smith, D. (2020) 'A different kind of Samhain', *Damh the Bard*, 4 November. Available at: https://www.paganmusic.co.uk/a-different-kind-of-samhain/ (Accessed: 5 November 2020).

Tea with a Druid (n.d) Home [You Tube channel]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=tea+with+a+druid (Accessed: 13 June 2025).

Turner, V. (1967) 'Betwixt and between: the liminal period in rites de passage', in *The forest of symbols: aspects of Ndembu ritual*. New Yprk: Cornel University Press, pp. 93–111.

Turner, V. (1974) 'Liminal to liminoid in play, flow and ritual: an essay in comparative symbology', *Rice University Studies*, 60(3), pp. 53–92.

Turner, V. (1996) *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure: 1966*. New York: Aldine Transaction.

Uisneach (2025) *Hill of Uisneach*, [Facebook]. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/hillofuisneach (Accessed: 19 March 2021).

Uzzell, J. (2023) *Dreaming the ancestors: an investigation into contemporary British Druidry and the ritualisation of death*. Ph.D Thesis Unpublished. Durham University. Available at: http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/15264/.

Van Gennep, A. (1904) *The rites of passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.