# PENDRAGON

## *The Fisher King*

XXXIV No 4

# editorial

*Vol XXXIV* No 4 *Summer 2007*

This issue finds us in the company of the **Fisher King**, on his boat (as Simon Rouse's cover art, in an evocation of blue willow pattern china, depicts), in his castle or even elsewhere – the church perhaps, or even next door in the pub. What does it all mean? Will you be any the wiser by the end? And are these the right Grail questions to ask?

In addition to the Rich Fisher, there are other strands running through this issue; as usual you, the reader, are invited to note connections, if any, with the main theme or with each other; and, as usual, we hope there is something or other here for each of you. Ruth Drobnak kindly tells us she finds *Pendragon* "fascinating", though Charles Evans-Günther, in a letter cancelling his subscription, tells us he feels *Pendragon* has "lost its way". We harbour the fond hope that we are pleasing most of the people most of the time, but we don't always get it right. We try to be responsive, so do let us have your views.

For both technical and personal reasons this issue has been delayed, for which huge apologies. The next featured theme will be **Gawain** (the subject of one of our early A5 editions in the last 70s), and it is planned to make this a double issue. As for future themes, **fiction** – both original and reviewed – is probably overdue; and **Guinevere**, another theme from the early days, should help restore the visibility of the Dark Age female in an otherwise male-dominated landscape.

Themes aside, *any* contribution, on *any* relevant Arthurian topic, is always welcome; we have several pieces in hand (reviews, poetry and stories, for example) and several others promised (Frederick II, Gaelic ballads and Arthur in medieval Welsh literature in particular) but can always find a space, especially for those short items such as a passing comment, a considered opinion, a piece of local news or a long-pondered query. *CL*

Ian Brown

***Reason under drizzle***
fishing rod thrusts out
substitutes a wish could
think
self-part no longer works

***Under the iron laws of hospitality***
long stressful hours
having to put on a show
be hospitable to family member
doesn't know he is and tradition
of court must be kept of telling
him nothing till he asks
a guest too young too gauche
to say the right the polite thing
and all the time that old wound hurting

at least one blessing
no need for even greater strain
of having to make conversation when
morning light returns the worst time
always

by when dawn comes his
inadequate behavior excuse enough
surely can be gone all every one
let him wake to an empty housecastle

invisible to him the vanished lot of us
safe beyond ghost wall in Faerie
a break however brief
where neither wounds nor silence hurt
until he's safely well gone on his way

*Steve Sneyd*






# pendragon

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## PEN-DRAGON

### ALTERNATE WORLDS

I felt I *had* slipped into another world at times reading the latest *Pendragon* (*XXXIV* No 3), focusing on Otherworlds. First there was the usual removal from reality, as whatever I had planned to do fell by the wayside that morning, while I took a preliminary scan through it. Then there was the splendid selection of Otherworlds to explore on fully reading it. What an excellent idea for a theme, albeit apparently arrived at almost by accident. I particularly enjoyed Ian Brown's "Rotunda Code" (14-17). All the talk of bulls in it reminded me strongly of one of the late Michael Bentine's radio monologues, where he described a new medical technique to replace a human voicebox with an ox's larynx to help improve the voice quality of bass singers. He called this procedure "The Bull-shift".

*Alastair McBeath, Morpeth, Northumberland*

I have been a member for a few years now and am so impressed with the diversity of interests and the level of erudition of the contributing members. The journal is fascinating and never fails to provoke thought and curiosity. I wish I were closer than the "other side of the Pond" so that I could attend the AGM but perhaps one day...

I am including a poem I wrote, inspired by a small article in *Pendragon* about Mike Baillie's theory of the Dark Ages being caused by a cometary near-miss. While it may be suspect and improbable, it was intriguing to me and I spent many happy hours reading more about it on the Web – as I am chiefly interested in the historical Arthur (yes, I remain a believer, Dumville notwithstanding) and Dark Age Britain. This is an elegy for the Arthur of my childhood, strongly influenced by Rosemary Sutcliff's wonderful *Sword at Sunset* (still my favorite of all "versions"). I wouldn't want readers' disagreement with Baillie to obscure the point of the poem. It was by no means intended as an endorsement or exploration of his theory. For me, it was an interesting idea, which became an extremely useful and engaging poetic device for an elegy...

*Jane Perr, via e-mail*

### ELECTICAL METEORS AND METEORIC IRON

Regarding the link between meteors and electrical phenomena persisting into the early 19th century (Steve Sneyd's letter in *Pendragon XXXIV* No 3, 6-7), there is a useful discussion in Chapters 1 and 2 of John G. Burke's *Cosmic Debris* (University of California Press, 1986). His Chapter 7 has notes on the folklore of thunderstones (= meteorites) too, but needs to be approached with a degree of caution, as not all his cited references confirm his claims for them. Martin Beech[1] discussed Charles Blagden's view of the electrical meteors concept, whose 1794 paper in the *Royal Society's Philosophical Transactions* (*Vol 74* 201) linked meteors with the aurora as well. Beech concluded (134): "...the idea that meteors might have an electrical origin persisted well into the 19th century (and even the 20th)", though regrettably giving no references for his parenthesized remark.

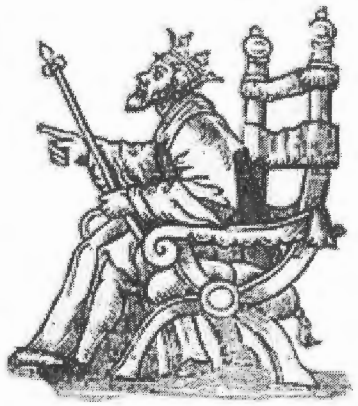
In respect of the Lombards' iron crown having significance perhaps because it was meteoritic, from work recently completed with my colleagues Kristine Larsen and Andrei Gheorghe, to be published in WGN as part of the Meteor Beliefs Project[2] next year, it seems unlikely meteoritic iron was felt important because of any perceived "heavenly" provenance before *c* 1800 AD for weapons and tools at least. However, Avicenna's *c* 11th-12th century AD text (as cited in my "Swords from the Stars", *Pendragon XXXIV* No 2, 15-17) suggested meteoritic swords were said to be believed especially beautiful by the Arabs at that time. This may be a later interpolation, possibly by a non-Arabic translator, but probably from a similar period. This "beauty" would be due to the damask pattern in the reheated meteoritic iron, as I mentioned in my article, likely easier seen in a sword than a crown, which might imply the iron crown's symbolic significance was of greater note than its material substance.

The *Time Team Special* on Channel 4 [April 24 2007], "Britain's Drowned World" set me thinking about Corrievreckan (Reviews, 31), and how far into prehistory it might be traceable. As the maps in the programme suggested, Jura was still attached to mainland Scotland through to about 6000-5000 BC or so, but the texts I have here on the end-Pleistocene glaciation and the more recent Quaternary, plus items referred to in the TV documentary, suggest that sea levels rose relatively rapidly after the icecaps covering much of northern Britain melted, which would probably have flooded the Corrievreckan channel north of Jura by around 5000-4000 BC, say. However, sea levels for Scotland and parts of northern England have been falling since the glaciation ended too, as the land "bounces back" from the tremendous weight of the ice. For the northern tip of Jura, the current rate of sea level fall is approximately 2 mm per year, according to the best map I have showing it. Assuming this to have been fairly constant since *c* 4500 BC would imply a sea level fall of around 13 metres over that time.

I'm not sure what the implications of this would be for Corrievreckan, as I've no detailed undersea maps to show what the water depths are there, nor what such a sea level difference to today might make with respect to the north shore of Jura especially, but this might be something to investigate to help suggest potential "earliest" dates for the whirlpool to have been active. Though the *Time Team* programme mostly dealt with events long preceding Arthurian times, it was interesting to see them investigating sites fairly close inshore, such as the Pembrokeshire submerged forest, as well, tales of which may perhaps lie behind Lyonesse and other submerged lands which do feature in Arthurian tales.

I was very pleased to see Kevin Mantle's letter (6), taking the plunge into the *Pendragon* authors' pool. I missed the game he mentioned, *Britannia*, when it was originally issued, but I see it is currently in print again, now from Fantasy Flight Games.[3]

*Alastair McBeath, Morpeth, Northumberland*



### MERRY OLD SOULS

[While] down in Colchester to read at the Arts Centre at a magazine launch ... [there was] just time to see the castle exterior and about two-thirds of the surviving Roman city walls – very bare but impressive for their sheer extent – made Caerwent seem toy size by comparison. I also hadn't realised how much the centre rises above the surrounding area, a much more defensible location than I'd imagined.

The mention on the display board outside the castle that the ruins of Claudius' temple, before being used as the foundations of the Norman keep, were known as Old (King) Cole's Palace reminded me of the intriguing Dark Age puzzle that, while Coel Hen in history was associated with the North – John Morris [*The Age of Arthur*] even suggests he might have been the last Wall commander or *Dux Britanniarum* before setting up as king of York *etc* – folk lore associates him firmly with the Colchester area.

As with so many Arthurian-era problems of people apparently bilocated in time and/or space, is it a case of two men with the same name, or did he so a Cunedda and move his HQ south, or similar? Given the geographical gap, it seems very unlikely he could have controlled both areas at once, yet the folk belief must have had some basis, however tenuous, particularly as I've not come across any tales about him located up here. An interesting speculation, though no answers come to mind.

[1] M Beech "The Makings of Meteor Astronomy: Part VII", *WGN, the Journal of the International Meteor Organization, Vol* 22 No 4, 1994, 132-134

[2] www.imo.net/projects/beliefs

[3] www.fantasyflightgames.com

Ian Brown's "The Rotunda Code" [last issue 14-17] was frighteningly convincing – I would imagine his "thesis" would certainly get a full page feature in the *Birmingham Post* on a quiet news day! Another minor clue which slipped the attentions of the "truth suppressors" is that the massive Norman earthwork castle above Henley-in-Arden, near both Birmingham and Warwick, was known as Beaudesert, a name close indeed to Hautdesert, the Green Knight's castle.

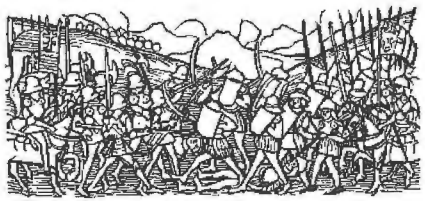
And then of course there's the forest of thinly veiled pointer in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Middle Earth clearly code for the Midlands, Mordor's description about as Black Countryish as you could get, Gnadalf clearly Merlin and Aragorn Arthur, and the Shire based on Tolkien's childhood home in the then hamelt of Sarehole and its mill, just south of Birmingham city centre, *etc.* Moreover, as a student Tolkien had an obsession with Warwick, the home of his *princesse lointaine*ish girlfriend, and used the place as a setting in early poems which later contributed to the roots of *LOTR*. Clearly he was trying to reveal the truth, but only to the cognoscenti!

One film not mentioned [Dave Burnham "Arthur on film"], which I recall as very striking, was Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac*. Some oddities even beyond the usual anachronisms like 15th century-style plate armour (I particularly remember a tower with an external stair and modern-type metal hand-rail!) but an effectively bleak, elegiac telling. Also, greatly enjoyed *Bugs Bunny at the Court of King Arthur*, a Chuck Jones masterpiece cleverly pastiching *A Connecticut Yankee*, really affectionate humour throughout – and "What's up, Doc?" really fitted when addressed by Bugs to Merlin.

As always a very enjoyable and interesting issue, even if trying to remember the actual names of the castles on pages 13 and 14 has become a minor mindworm. (Still on the art, wonderfully individualised "head to head" faces, page 36, cry out for their stories telling!)

*Steve Sneyd, Huddersfield, W Yorks*

*• The illustrations on pages 12, 13 and 14 are all of Pembrokeshire monuments – Carew cross and Roch Castle near Newgale, for example, from Edward Laws' 1888* The history of Little England beyond Wales.



*Le Morte d'Arthur*

Trees don't lie.
In the thickness of their rings
They voice their suffering.
Bristlecone Pines in California
Oaks in Germany and Ireland
Scots' Pines in Sweden and
The Fitzroya in China,
All lament the year 540.
Men reported a sun without light or heat
Casting no shadows
Seasons lost their distinction
All cold, all dry, all strange
Clouds of yellow dust in China
Red rain in Gaul
Withered crops, soured grapes.
Plague killed those who survived.
The Roman Empire
Brought down by legions of rats.

What could cripple the world?
Some say a comet passing close
Showered fragments and debris,
Veiling the sun, turning
Farmland into wasteland.
The Dark Ages began.

In 539, the great Arthur died at Camlann.
Some say he was myth, a sky god
Fallen to earth or legend,
King of a dying land.

I say he was a great warlord,
Leader of tribal Britons.
Victory at Mount Badon long
Delayed the Anglo-Saxon conquest
But at Camlann, he fought rebels,
His nephew, Medraut, chief among them.
In slaying him, Arthur was slain.

The Heavens wept, a star
Plunged earthward in despair
Showering sparks of tears and ash
Across a darkening sky,
Turning day into perpetual twilight.

*Jane Perr*





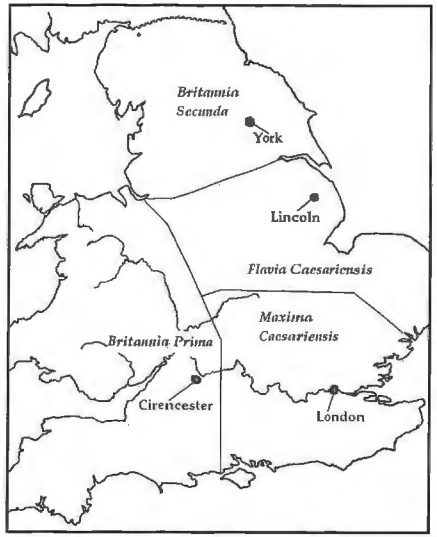
*Aneirin's Lament*

Where were you, Arthur
when we stood upon the Wall
shield to shield against the Saxon flood?
Where were you when
our spears gore smeared
we tasted bitter Saxon blades
while ravens gorged on Britons' blood?
Where were you when
300 of Gododdin's sons
held out against 10,000 Angle men
land-hungry for our island?
*Were you snug-safe in Camelot*
*listening to the troubadours*
*sing simpering songs to Guinevere*
*your fickle, faithless queen?*
Yet were we brave at Catterick that day
Brave gold-torqued battle hounds
inflamed by mead
our shields blood stained, most excellent in battle.
We fought to save Gododdin land
*... and though we were not Arthur ...*
so swift our blades, so sure our thrust
we might have held the Wall if you'd been there.
*Where were you, Arthur?*
Alas, alas, for Mynyddawg Mynfawr's men
Lost, all lost, our sweetest Southern lands
Gone, gone, brave warriors all but three
Let their blood-reddened spears remain uncleansed.
Pale are the faces upturned to the moon
while ravens wheel above the battlefield.
Slain, Gododdin's noble warrior band
with only poets left to tell the tale.



Kate Pollard

## old news




### HOW ROMAN BRITAIN ENDED

Several recent books have attempted to outline the transition from Roman to Barbarian Britain, and broadly they split into two camps. Some hold to a scenario where the disjuncture was virtually absolute, with Scotti, Picts, Irish, Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Franks overrunning the island except for gallant pockets of resistance, while others prefer a model of continuity and evolution.

Two recent articles epitomise aspects of the two factions' arguments. First is Rhobert ap Steffan in a 2006 issue of *Cambria*, who asserts that Badbury Rings in Dorset is Badon on the basis that the 9th-century *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* has Jutes in the New Forest and Saxons landing in the Solent in 495. As well as suggesting that nearby Cadbury Castle in Somerset is Camlann, he gives as "plausible" an explanation that Arthur was actually Ambrosius Aurelianus because the near contemporary writer Gildas "simply left out the name Arthur from the full title: Arturus Ambrosius Aurelianus".

This is lazy journalism. The article gives no references but instead regurgitates scenarios that are forty or

more years out of date. His purpose is to account for the formation of the nation of Wales in the shape of the beleaguered "Britons of the mountainous western peninsular [*sic*]. And thus it was that the nation of the Cymry was born."

A more balanced view of events in Western Britain is taken by Roger White of the University of Birmingham. Though covering the same time-scale, the author of *Britannia Prima: Britain's last Roman province* (Tempus) argues from a multi-disciplinary approach that there was more continuity in geo-political terms than is usually acknowledged.

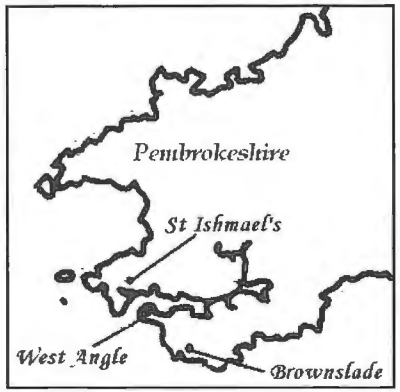
He notes that the three provinces of late Roman Britannia that lay to the east – Britannia Secunda, Flavia Caesariensis and Maxima Caesariensis, with their capitals at York, Lincoln and London – "rapidly" collapsed in the 5th century. In maps he demonstrates how distinctive styles of brooches – implying settlement by different ethnic groups – characterise and distinguish these three eastern provinces, whereas early Anglo-Saxon burials show minimal penetration of the Welsh marches in the post-Roman period. How was this so? White proposes that Britannia Prima's survival explains this through being "able to mount a successful resistance to the invaders".

The Dobunni, with their capital probably at Cirencester, formed the "core tribe" of Britannia Prima, with the Dumnonii and Durotriges to the south, the Cornovii to the north, and the four tribes in what was later to be Wales. When Constantine III withdrew the *comitatenses* or field army in the early 5th century, the whole of Britannia lacked a professional army (other than the frontier troops) to defend them. What was their solution?

The traditional story is that barbarians were invited in to fill the gap as mercenaries, and continuing archaeology paints an improved picture of this scenario: Franks, Saxons and Jutes in Maxima Caesariensis, Angles in Flavia Caesariensis and both Anglians and Scandinavians in Britannia Secunda. In Western Britain the gap, White argues, was filled by the Irish, such as the Cunorix whose tombstone appears in Wroxeter, and by native troops stationed on the eastern frontier of Britannia Prima (if the distribution of belt fittings and other late Roman military equipment such as lead-weighted darts are anything to go by).

While militarily Britannia Prima seems to have maintained a sense of *romanitas*, in trade terms the western extremities such as Dyfed and Cornwall were looking to the sea-routes for goods from Gaul and the Eastern Mediterranean. And while some life in the town carried on (albeit on a reduced scale), their main *raison d'être* was as a seat for Christian bishoprics. Once the bishops moved to monasteries in the 6th century, any lingering need to maintain towns disappeared.

White believes that Britannia Prima ceased to have a coherent identity by the end of the 5th century, but it bought time for the nearly emerging kingdoms of the west that were later to develop into Wales and Cornwall. (Elsewhere, as in Mercia, population growth and the adoption of Anglo-Saxon fashions and language resulted in hybrid "Anglo-British" kingdoms.) And here at least Rhobert ap Steffan and Roger White might have common ground, as White suggests that a late 5th-century resistance under Ambrosius reported by Gildas "may be the origin of the Arthur legends".[4] *CL*




[4] Rhobert ap Steffan "Mynydd Baddon: a quest for the real Arthur" *Cambria* (Jan-Feb 2006) 42-46; Roger White "The lingering death of Roman Britain" *Current Archaeology 211* (Sept-Oct 2007) 11-18





**ARTHUR'S BRITAIN: LIFE & DEATH**

Was the so-called Age of Arthur a Golden Age, as some believe? Or was life short and hard for the ordinary Briton? We have reported before on Dark Age burials in West Wales (near **St Ishmaels**), and Cambria Archaeology (the Dyfed Archaeological Trust) now notes more such burials, some at risk of erosion on Pembrokeshire's coastline, which point to the latter proposition.[5]

These burials are in what are known as cist graves, stone-lined tombs with upright slabs surrounding the body, sometimes with slab covers over to create a sort of stone coffin. At **West Angle Bay** several cist graves were seen exposed in the cliff face in 1997 and in 2002. In a neighbouring field 19th-century references to an *Old Church* and the site of a burial ground pointed to an oval enclosure, and trenches in 2005 and 2006 aimed to explore the burials and chronology.

The suggested sequence was of a burial plot enclosed by a ditch in the 6th century, succeeded by a circular stone and earth boundary bank (which disturbed earlier burials), followed by the establishment of St Anthony's Chapel after the 10th century. Of the total of eight cist burials excavated, seven were of infants.

The Trust also excavated an early medieval cemetery next to a Bronze Age burial mound at **Brownslade** on the Castlemartin Army Training Range, also near the Pembrokeshire coast. Severe disturbance by badgers necessitated full excavation of part of the site, which revealed the remains of more than thirty burials, some of which were (as at Angle) in cist graves.

The environmental conditions (wind-blown sand) allowed good analysis of the bones of around 45 individuals. This revealed that there were equal numbers of adult males, adult females and juveniles, with the proportion of juveniles, at just over 33%, noted as *not* unusual for the early medieval period. In addition to high juvenile mortality, life was clearly not easy because the remains showed characteristics "due to adaptations caused by repetitive work, suggesting that some members of the population had a very physical and, possible, a harsh lifestyle [which] may have started early in life." Not such a Golden Age then. *CL*

[5] "An early medieval cemetery in Angle" and "Badgers and barrows" *Cambria Archaeology/Archaeoleg Cambria Newsletter 5* (Spring 2007)

**GOVAN DARK AGE LINK BROKEN?**

The future of **Govan Old Parish Church** in Glasgow was put in doubt earlier this year when the Church of Scotland decided to "rationalise its priorities" and close the building.[6]

Though only built in 1888, the A-listed Victorian building houses an important collection of ancient **pre-Christian and Christian sculptures** largely retrieved from its surrounding cemetery. Dating back a millennium and a half and claimed as the oldest known Christian site in Glasgow, its intended closure has raised an outcry from both the religious and academic community. "Bizarre" was how Stephen Driscoll, professor of archaeology at Glasgow University, described the decision to close the door on the oldest "cultural centre of Govan", and a former minister of the church called the move "unforgivable".

As there is no opportunity to appeal a Church of Scotland committee's decision, the congregation will this autumn amalgamate with Govan New Church. The only hope is that when a new use is found for the building – as a museum? or a community centre? – some worship will still be possible. *CL*

*Next issue*

Sightings of a huge serpent (or is it a dragon?) in Herefordshire and Twrch Trwyth in America

[6] Maxwell MacLeod, Rachelle Money "Outcry over move to close sixth-century church" *Sunday Herald* June 3 2007; an update is promised from Eileen Buchanan to let us know what will happen to the building

# THE CASTLE OF KERGLAS

From *Le Foyer Breton* by Emile Souvestre, English version Andrew Lang

Peronnik was a poor idiot who belonged to nobody, and he would have died of starvation if it had not been for the kindness of the village people, who gave him food whenever he chose to ask for it. And as for a bed, when night came, and he grew sleepy, he looked about for a heap of straw, and making a hole in it, crept in, like a lizard. Idiot though he was, he was never unhappy, but always thanked gratefully those who fed him, and sometimes would stop for a little and sing to them. For he could imitate a lark so well, that no one knew which was Peronnik and which was the bird.

He had been wandering in a forest one day for several hours, and when evening approached, he suddenly felt very hungry. Luckily, just at that place the trees grew thinner, and he could see a small farmhouse a little way off. Peronnik went straight towards it, and found the farmer's wife standing at the door holding in her hands the large bowl out of which her children had eaten their supper.

'I am hungry, will you give me something to eat?' asked the boy.

'If you can find anything here, you are welcome to it,' answered she, and, indeed, there was not much left, as everybody's spoon had dipped in. But Peronnik ate what was there with a hearty appetite, and thought that he had never tasted better food.

'It is made of the finest flour and mixed with the richest milk and stirred by the best cook in all the countryside,' and though he said it to himself, the woman heard him.

'Poor innocent,' she murmured, 'he does not know what he is saying, but I will cut him a slice of that new wheaten loaf,' and so she did, and Peronnik ate up every crumb, and declared that nobody less than the bishop's baker could have baked it. This flattered the farmer's wife so much that she gave him some butter to spread on it, and Peronnik was still eating it on the doorstep when an armed knight rode up.

'Can you tell me the way to the castle of Kerglas?' asked he.

'To Kerglas? Are you really going to Kerglas?' cried the woman, turning pale.

'Yes; and in order to get there I have come from a country so far off that it has taken me three months' hard riding to travel as far as this.'

'And why do you want to go to Kerglas?' said she.

'I am seeking the basin of gold and the lance of diamonds which are in the castle,' he answered. Then Peronnik looked up. 'The basin and the lance are very costly things,' he said suddenly.

'More costly and precious than all the crowns in the world,' replied the stranger, 'for not only will the basin furnish you with the best food that you can dream of, but if you drink of it, it will cure you of any illness however dangerous, and will even bring the dead back to life, if it touches their mouths. As to the diamond lance, that will cut through any stone or metal.'

'And to whom do these wonders belong?' asked Peronnik in amazement.

'To a magician named Rogear who lives in the castle,' answered the woman. 'Every day he passes along here, mounted on a black mare, with a colt thirteen months old trotting behind. But no one dares to attack him, as he always carries his lance.'

'That is true,' said the knight, 'but there is a spell laid upon him which forbids his using it within the castle of Kerglas. The moment he enters, the basin and lance are put away in a dark cellar which no key but one can open. And that is the place where I wish to fight the magician.'

'You will never overcome him, Sir Knight,' replied the woman, shaking her head. 'More than a hundred gentlemen have ridden past this house bent on the same errand, and not one has ever come back.'





'I know that, good woman,' returned the knight, 'but then they did not have, like me, instructions from the hermit of Blavet.'

'And what did the hermit tell you?' asked Peronnik.

'He told me that I should have to pass through a wood full of all sorts of enchantments and voices, which would try to frighten me and make me lose my way. Most of those who have gone before me have wandered they know not where, and perished from cold, hunger, or fatigue.'

'Well, suppose you get through safely?' said the idiot.

'If I do,' continued the knight, 'I shall then meet a sort of fairy armed with a needle of fire which burns to ashes all it touches. This dwarf stands guarding an apple-tree, from which I am bound to pluck an apple.'

'And next?' inquired Peronnik.

'Next I shall find the flower that laughs, protected by a lion whose mane is formed of vipers. I must pluck that flower, and go on to the lake of the dragons and fight the black man who holds in his hand the iron ball which never misses its mark and returns of its own accord to its master. After that, I enter the valley of pleasure, where some who conquered all the other obstacles have left their bones. If I can win through this, I shall reach a river with only one ford, where a lady in black will be seated. She will mount my horse behind me, and tell me what I am to do next.'

He paused, and the woman shook her head.

'You will never be able to do all that,' said she, but he bade her remember that these were only matters for men, and galloped away down the path she pointed out.

The farmer's wife sighed and, giving Peronnik some more food, bade him good-night. The idiot rose and was opening the gate which led into the forest when the farmer himself came up.

'I want a boy to tend my cattle,' he said abruptly, 'as the one I had has run away. Will you stay and do it?' and Peronnik, though he loved his liberty and hated work, recollected the good food he had eaten, and agreed to stop.

At sunrise he collected his herd carefully and led them to the rich pasture which lay along the borders of the forest, cutting himself a hazel wand with which to keep them in order.

His task was not quite so easy as it looked, for the cows had a way of straying into the wood, and by the time he had brought one back another was off. He had gone some distance into the trees, after a naughty black cow which gave him more trouble than all the rest, when he heard the noise of horse's feet, and peeping through the leaves he beheld the giant Rogear seated on his mare, with the colt trotting behind. Round the giant's neck hung the golden bowl suspended from a chain, and in his hand he grasped the diamond lance, which gleamed like fire. But as soon as he was out of sight the idiot sought in vain for traces of the path he had taken.

This happened not only once but many times, till Peronnik grew so used to him that he never troubled to hide. But on each occasion he saw him the desire to possess the bowl and the lance became stronger.

One evening the boy was sitting alone on the edge of the forest, when a man with a white beard stopped beside him. 'Do you want to know the way to Kerglas?' asked the idiot, and the man answered 'I know it well.'

'You have been there without being killed by the magician?' cried Peronnik.

'Oh! he had nothing to fear from me,' replied the white-bearded man, 'I am Rogear's elder brother, the wizard Bryak. When I wish to visit him I always pass this way, and as even I cannot go through the enchanted wood without losing myself, I call the colt to guide me.' Stooping down as he spoke he traced three circles on the ground and murmured some words very low, which Peronnik could not hear. Then he added aloud:

*Colt, free to run and free to eat,*
*Colt, gallop fast until we meet,*

and instantly the colt appeared, frisking and jumping to the wizard, who threw a halter over his neck and leapt on his back.

Peronnik kept silence at the farm about this adventure, but he understood very well that if he was ever to get to Kerglas he must first catch the colt which knew the way. Unhappily he had not heard the magic words uttered by the wizard, and he could not manage to draw the three circles, so if he was to summon the colt at all he must invent some other means of doing it.

All day long, while he was herding the cows, he thought and thought how he was to call the colt, for he felt sure that once on its back he could overcome the other dangers. Meantime he must be ready in case a chance should come, and he made his preparations at night, when everyone was asleep. Remembering what he had seen the wizard do, he patched up an old halter that was hanging in a corner of the stable, twisted a rope of hemp to catch the colt's feet, and a net such as is used for snaring birds. Next he sewed roughly together some bits of cloth to serve as a pocket, and this he filled with glue and lark's feathers, a string of beads, a whistle of elder wood, and a slice of bread rubbed over with bacon fat. Then he went out to the path down which Rogear, his mare, and the colt always rode, and crumbled the bread on one side of it.

Punctual to their hour all three appeared, eagerly watched by Peronnik, who lay hid in the bushes close by. Suppose it was useless; suppose the mare, and not the colt, ate the crumbs? Suppose--but no! the mare and her rider went safely by, vanishing round a corner, while the colt, trotting along with its head on the ground, smelt the bread, and began greedily to lick up the pieces. Oh, how good it was! Why had no one ever given it that before, and so absorbed was the little beast, sniffing about after a few more crumbs, that it never heard Peronnik creep up till it felt the halter on its neck and the rope round its feet, and--in another moment--some one on its back.

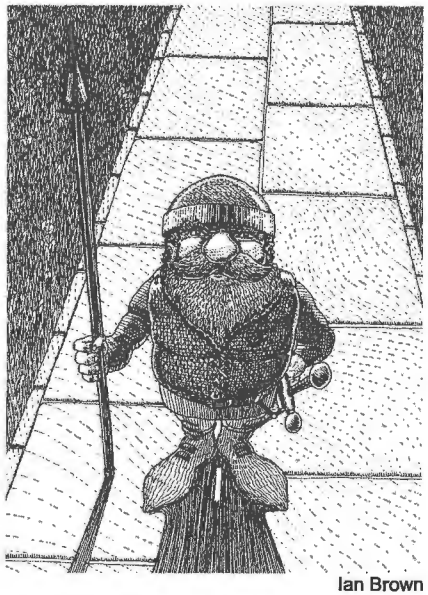
Going as fast as the hobbles would allow, the colt turned into one of the wildest parts of the forest, while its rider sat trembling at the strange sights he saw. Sometimes the earth seemed to open in front of them and he was looking into a bottomless pit; sometimes the trees burst into flames and he found himself in the midst of a fire; often in the act of crossing a stream the water rose and threatened to sweep him away; and again, at the foot of a mountain, great rocks would roll towards him, as if they would crush him and his colt beneath their weight. To his dying day Peronnik never knew whether these things were real or if he only imagined them, but he pulled down his knitted cap so as to cover his eyes, and trusted the colt to carry him down the right road.

At last the forest was left behind, and they came out on a wide plain where the air blew fresh and strong. The idiot ventured to peep out, and found to his relief that the enchantments seemed to have ended, though a thrill of horror shot through him as he noticed the skeletons of men scattered over the plain, beside the skeletons of their horses. And what were those grey forms trotting away in the distance? Were they—could they be—wolves?

But vast through the plain seemed, it did not take long to cross, and very soon the colt entered a sort of shady park in which was standing a single apple-tree, its branches bowed down to the ground with the weight of its fruit. In front was the korigan—the little fairy man—holding in his hand the fiery sword, which reduced to ashes everything it touched. At the sight of Peronnik he uttered a piercing scream, and raised his sword, but without appearing surprised the youth only lifted his cap, though he took care to remain at a little distance.







Ian Brown

'Do not be alarmed, my prince,' said Peronnik, 'I am just on my way to Kerglas, as the noble Rogear has begged me to come to him on business.'

'Begged you to come!' repeated the dwarf, 'and who, then, are you?'

'I am the new servant he has engaged, as you know very well,' answered Peronnik.

'I do not know at all,' rejoined the korigan sulkily, 'and you may be a robber for all I can tell.'

'I am so sorry,' replied Peronnik, 'but I may be wrong in calling myself a servant, for I am only a bird-catcher. But do not delay me, I pray, for his highness the magician expects me, and, as you see, has lent me his colt so that I may reach the castle all the quicker.'

At these words the korigan cast his eyes for the first time on the colt, which he knew to be the one belonging to the magician, and began to think that the young man was speaking the truth. After examining the horse, he studied the rider, who had such an innocent, and indeed vacant, air that he appeared incapable of inventing a story. Still, the dwarf did not feel quite sure that all was right, and asked what the magician wanted with a bird- catcher.

'From what he says, he wants one very badly,' replied Peronnik, 'as he declares that all his grain and all the fruit in his garden at Kerglas are eaten up by the birds.'

'And how are you going to stop that, my fine fellow?' inquired the korigan; and Peronnik showed him the snare he had prepared, and remarked that no bird could possible escape from it.

'That is just what I should like to be sure of,' answered the korigan. 'My apples are completely eaten up by blackbirds and thrushes. Lay your snare, and if you can manage to catch them, I will let you pass.'

'That is a fair bargain,' and as he spoke Peronnik jumped down and fastened his colt to a tree; then, stopping, he fixed one end of the net to the trunk of the apple tree, and called to the korigan to hold the other while he took out the pegs. The dwarf did as he was bid, when suddenly Peronnik threw the noose over his neck and drew it close, and the korigan was held as fast as any of the birds he wished to snare.

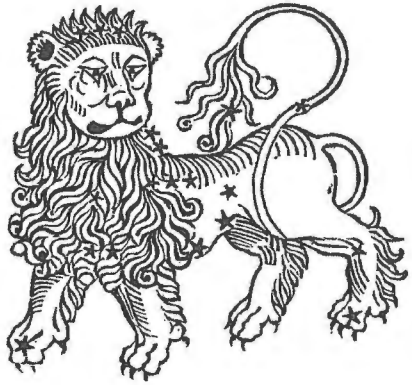
Shrieking with rage, he tried to undo the cord, but he only pulled the knot tighter. He had put down the sword on the grass, and Peronnik had been careful to fix the net on the other side of the tree, so that it was now easy for him to pluck an apple and to mount his horse, without being hindered by the dwarf, whom he left to his fate.

When they had left the plain behind them, Peronnik and his steed found themselves in a narrow valley in which was a grove of trees, full of all sorts of sweet-smelling things--roses of every colour, yellow broom, pink honeysuckle--while above them all towered a wonderful scarlet pansy whose face bore a strange expression. This was the flower that laughs, and no one who looked at it could help laughing too. Peronnik's heart beat high at the thought that he had reached safely the second trial, and he gazed quite calmly at the lion with the mane of vipers twisting and twirling, who walked up and down in front of the grove.

The young man pulled up and removed his cap, for, idiot though he was, he knew that when you have to do with people greater than yourself, a cap is more useful in the hand than on the

head. Then, after wishing all kinds of good fortune to the lion and his family, he inquired if he was on the right road to Kerglas.

'And what is your business at Kerglas?' asked the lion with a growl, and showing his teeth.



'With all respect,' answered Peronnik, pretending to be very frightened, 'I am the servant of a lady who is a friend of the noble Rogear and sends him some larks for a pasty.'

'Larks?' cried the lion, licking his long whiskers. 'Why, it must be a century since I have had any! Have you a large quantity with you?'

'As many as this bag will hold,' replied Peronnik, opening, as he spoke, the bag which he had filled with feathers and glue; and to prove what he said, he turned his back on the lion and began to imitate the song of a lark.

'Come,' exclaimed the lion, whose mouth watered, 'show me the birds! I should like to see if they are fat enough for my master.'

'I would do it with pleasure,' answered the idiot, 'but if I once open the bag they will all fly away.'

'Well, open it wide enough for me to look in,' said the lion, drawing a little nearer.

Now this was just what Peronnik had been hoping for, so he held the bag while the lion opened it carefully and put his head right inside, so that he might get a good mouthful of larks. But the mass of feathers and glue stuck to him, and before he could pull his head out again Peronnik had drawn tight the cord, and tied it in a knot that no man could untie. Then, quickly gathering the flower that laughs, he rode off as fast as the colt could take him.

The path soon led to the lake of the dragons, which he had to swim across. The colt, who was accustomed to it, plunged into the water without hesitation; but as soon as the dragons caught sight of Peronnik they approached from all parts of the lake in order to devour him.

This time Peronnik did not trouble to take off his cap, but he threw the beads he carried with him into the water, as you throw black corn to a duck, and with each bead that he swallowed a dragon turned on his back and died, so that the idiot reached the other side without further trouble.

The valley guarded by the black man now lay before him, and from afar Peronnik beheld him, chained by one foot to a rock at the entrance, and holding the iron ball which never missed its mark and always returned to its master's hand. In his head the black man had six eyes that were never all shut at once, but kept watch one after the other. At this moment they were all open, and Peronnik knew well that if the black man caught a glimpse of him he would cast his ball. So, hiding the colt behind a thicket of bushes, he crawled along a ditch and crouched close to the very rock to which the black man was chained.

The day was hot, and after a while the man began to grow sleepy. Two of his eyes closed, and Peronnik sang gently. In a moment a third eye shut, and Peronnik sang on. The lid of a fourth eye dropped heavily, and then those of the fifth and the sixth. The black man was asleep altogether.

Then, on tiptoe, the idiot crept back to the colt which he led over soft moss past the black man into the vale of pleasure, a delicious garden full of fruits that dangled before your mouth, fountains running with wine, and flowers chanting in soft little voices. Further on, tables were spread with food, and girls dancing on the grass called to him to join them.

Peronnik heard, and, scarcely knowing what he did drew the colt into a slower pace. He sniffed greedily the smell of the dishes, and raised his head the better to see the dancers. Another





instant and he would have stopped altogether and been lost, like others before him, when suddenly there came to him like a vision the golden bowl and the diamond lance. Drawing his whistle from his pocket, he blew it loudly, so as to drown the sweet sounds about him, and ate what was left of his bread and bacon to still the craving of the magic fruits. His eyes he fixed steadily on the ears of the colt, that he might not see the dancers.

In this way he was able to reach the end of the garden, and at length perceived the castle of Kerglas, with the river between them which had only one ford. Would the lady be there, as the old man had told him? Yes, surely that was she, sitting on a rock, in a black satin dress, and her face the colour of a Moorish woman's. The idiot rode up, and took off his cap more politely than ever, and asked if she did not wish to cross the river.

'I was waiting for you to help me do so,' answered she. 'Come near, that I may get up behind you.'

Peronnik did as she bade him, and by the help of his arm she jumped nimbly on to the back of the colt.

'Do you know how to kill the magician?' asked the lady, as they were crossing the ford.

'I thought that, being a magician, he was immortal, and that no one could kill him,' replied Peronnik.

'Persuade him to taste that apple, and he will die, and if that is not enough I will touch him with my finger, for I am the plague,' answered she.

'But if I kill him, how am I to get the golden bowl and the diamond lance that are hidden in the cellar without a key?' rejoined Peronnik.

'The flower that laughs opens all doors and lightens all darkness,' said the lady; and as she spoke, they reached the further bank, and advanced towards the castle.

In front of the entrance was a sort of tent supported on poles, and under it the giant was sitting, basking in the sun. As soon as he noticed the colt bearing Peronnik and the lady, he lifted his head, and cried in a voice of thunder:

'Why, it is surely the idiot, riding my colt thirteen months old!'

'Greatest of magicians, you are right,' answered Peronnik.

'And how did you manage to catch him?' asked the giant.

'By repeating what I learnt from your brother Bryak on the edge of the forest,' replied the idiot. 'I just said--

*Colt, free to run and free to eat,*
*Colt, gallop fast until we meet,*

and it came directly.'

'You know my brother, then?' inquired the giant. 'Tell me why he sent you here.'

'To bring you two gifts which he has just received from the country of the Moors,' answered Peronnik: 'the apple of delight and the woman of submission. If you eat the apple you will not desire anything else, and if you take the woman as your servant you will never wish for another.'

'Well, give me the apple, and bid the woman get down,' answered Rogear.

The idiot obeyed, but at the first taste of the apple the giant staggered, and as the long yellow finger of the woman touched him he fell dead.

Leaving the magician where he lay, Peronnik entered the palace, bearing with him the flower that laughs. Fifty doors flew open before him, and at length he reached a long flight of steps which seemed to lead into the bowels of the earth. Down these he went till he came to a silver door without a bar or key. Then he held up high the flower that laughs, and the door slowly swung back, displaying a deep cavern, which was as bright as the day from the shining of the golden bowl and the diamond lance. The idiot hastily ran forward and hung the bowl round his neck from the chain which was attached to it, and took the lance in his hand. As he did so, the ground shook beneath him, and with an awful rumbling the palace disappeared, and Peronnik found himself standing close to the forest where he led the cattle to graze.

Though darkness was coming on, Peronnik never thought of entering the farm, but followed the road which led to the court of the duke of Brittany. As he passed through the town of Vannes he stopped at a tailor's shop, and bought a beautiful costume of brown velvet and a white horse, which he paid for with a handful of gold that he had picked up in the corridor of the castle of Kerglas. Thus

he made his way to the city of Nantes, which at that moment was besieged by the French.

A little way off, Peronnik stopped and looked about him. For miles round the country was bare, for the enemy had cut down every tree and burnt every blade of corn; and, idiot though he might be, Peronnik was able to grasp that inside the gates men were dying of famine. He was still gazing with horror, when a trumpeter appeared on the walls, and, after blowing a loud blast, announced that the duke would adopt as his heir the man who could drive the French out of the country.

On the four sides of the city the trumpeter blew his blast, and the last time Peronnik, who had ridden up as close as he might, answered him.

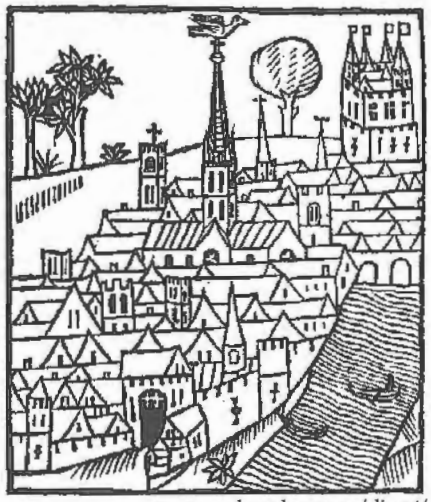
'You need blow no more,' said he, 'for I myself will free the town from her enemies.' And turning to a soldier who came running up, waving his sword, he touched him with the magic lance, and he fell dead on the spot. The men who were following stood still, amazed. Their comrade's armour had not been pierced, of that they were sure, yet he was dead, as if he had been struck to the heart. But before they had time to recover from their astonishment, Peronnik cried out:

'You see how my foes will fare; now behold what I can do for my friends,' and, stooping down, he laid the golden bowl against the mouth of the soldier, who sat up as well as ever. Then, jumping his horse across the trench, he entered the gate of the city, which had opened wide enough to receive him.

The news of these marvels quickly spread through the town, and put fresh spirit into the garrison, so that they declared themselves able to fight under the command of the young stranger. And as the bowl restored all the dead Bretons to life, Peronnik soon had an army large enough to drive away the French, and fulfilled his promise of delivering his country.

As to the bowl and the lance, no one knows what became of them, but some say that Bryak the sorcerer managed to steal them again, and that any one who wishes to possess them must seek them as Peronnik did.[1] ☙

[1] Andrew Lang (1910) *The Lilac Fairy Book*; http://www.mythfolklore.net/andrewlang/index.htm



www.godecookery.com/clipart/

• It is sometimes claimed that *Peronnik* or *The Castle of Kerglas* ("The Green Castle") is the "direct source of the Grail poems",[2] but this is to misunderstand the nature of folktales. *The Castle of Kerglas* was presented as an authentic fairy-tale only in 1845 by Emile Souvestre, in his *Le Foyer Breton* ('The Breton Hearth'), and, even if genuine, still retains its literary gloss, being of its place and particularly of its time. In other words, in this form it post-dates the medieval romances, and may even have been influenced by them.

When we come to look at its motifs, yes, it does include a simpleton, a magical lance, a miraculous bowl and other wonderful elements, but these are common to many other fairy-tales the world over. It does offer a Celtic origin, but this is not enough. Still, it is re-printed here on its own virtues, in Andrew Lang's 1910 version. Another version, *Perronik, the innocent*, by the American writer Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, first appeared in 1915 and was republished in 1996 by John Matthews.[3]

*Chris Lovegrove*

[2] V Junk in 1911, quoted in E Jung and M-L von Franz (1971) *The Grail Legend* (Hodder & Stoughton) 35-6

[3] John Matthews (1996) *Sources of the Grail* (Floris Books) 482-499





# The Fisher King

## *Gnostic Priest of the High Mysteries of the Grail*

**Shani Oates**

Intrinsic to the Grail Mysteries, this enigmatic figure has baffled and intrigued both mystics and scholars alike. Literary genres of 12th century Europe still reflected the artistic mores of medieval metaphysics, heavily influenced by contemporary mystics such as Hildegard of Bingin and Bernard of Clairvaux whose studies into the realms of individuation where in ever creasing danger of encroachment by the rising Scholasticism of the Middle Ages. Here logic and reason were to replace the existentialism of faith and being. Jewish and Muslim philosophies merged with Greek and Latin studies, reconciling classical teachings with Christian theology which eventually minimised the free practice of Christian Mysticism. Within this conflict of the higher arts, the grail Mysteries evolved and developed sequentially, typifying each stage, increasing our inability to capture the true essence of the Grail in a universal moment of time. But perhaps this is precisely why the Mystery lures us still, captivating all seekers within its thrall.

Appropriately, because it is a mystery, there is no general consensus of opinion purporting to be the definitive answer, leading to considerable speculation. Naturally, certain studies are more academic than others, but this should not preclude those of a more insightful nature; all are valid in the holistic nature of the Grail Mysteries. When we fail to seek it, the mystery dies, and then the grail truly serves no-one. Within this brief discourse, I shall discuss but a few, selected only by my own personal interest and for no other particular merit. My opinions and impressions of these will supplement their succinct rendition throughout the unfolding text. Medieval tales invariably prove to be a demonstrable amalgam of Christian theology, Oriental philosophy, 'Celtic' myth and alchemical treatises, laced with metaphors that adumbrate the quester's search for Universal Gnosis.

The great mythographer Joseph Campbell (1991: 405) asserts a context of synthesised subterranean Near Eastern mystery cults, evolving from the Bronze Age into the Iron Age, wherein animated tales of conquest and heroes overlay the earlier myths of fructifying gods, the spirit of the land and an inherent fundamental harmonic. He tirelessly explores these themes from Mesopotamia, through India into Ireland, the fruits of which yield promising analogies between the Grail and early sacramental bowls (and which is worthy of greater study than is permissible here). His study refutes the Grail as a Eucharistic vessel, dismissing it as readily as Jessie Weston's theory of the Grail as being indicative of pagan fertility rites. Initiation, a Grail Castle, a forfeit and redemption form the nucleus of the grail legends, so where exactly does the salvation of the 'Fisher' king lie?

Campbell (407-8) suggests the origin of the Fisher king in the sea gods of antiquity, of Poseidon, Manannan mac Lir, Nuada/Nodens, of Vishnu and Oannes, and especially in the Mesopotamian serpent god Ningizzida, who was known as 'Lord of the Tree of Life' and whose qualities included healing and magick. All of these deities represent graphic models for this priestly figure, many of whom may be traced significantly through their artistic representations. These include mystic 'fishermen' depicted on a 2nd millennium BCE Babylonian seal and more interestingly, a 3rd century CE sacramental bowl. The latter, displaying the figure of Orpheus (also 'fishing'), is believed to be a baptismal vessel redolent of the watery abyss, through which ones soul is reborn as pure thought, as Truth, with the knowledge of life and death. These gnostic mysteries confirm a lineage of priest-kings whose esoteric form was commonly depicted as a 'fish', from Oannes to Jesus. Mesopotamian reliefs depict the sacred vessel carried by the (fish)priest-king as an inverted truncated cone, the chthonic reflection of the sacred omphalos, the mound of creation

(*ibid*12-17).

These deities of the formative world and the life giving waters of the abyss were aspected within each initiate of the sacred mysteries to be experienced and realised as the divine within. Thus he becomes a *Mystes*, a full initiate, a 'fisher' priest, himself a bearer of the bowl, representative of his acquired capacity as a 'true' man. With this truth, he is able to generate fertility and abundance of the land as a sustainer of life (the corporeal element) in addition to being a liberator of the soul (non-corporeal element). He is both creator and destroyer, maintaining the inverse reflections of the paradox of existence. Effectually, he becomes the sacrificial king as the Orphic mysteries merged with those of Christianity, transforming a concept of the unity of all consciousness with the totality of being and thus the cycle of life, to the literal physical death of an avatar. This fusion lead to a mystical teaching within Christianity that flourished within the grail mysteries; Christ replaced Orpheus as the supreme mystagogue whose 'death' and 'ascent' were understood by gnostics to refer to his re-attainment of at-one-ment and not in any orthodox sense of literal reparation for our perceived 'sins' (*ibid* 25-26).

In myth, water is seldom referred to without recourse to the moon, and Campbell (409-10) highlights the magical and scientific connection between them. Water and all tides are governed by this celestial body; it waxes and wanes, having two vital modes. When waning it is perceived as 'lame', its incapacity apparent, yet, this dark mode conceals the mysteries attributed to it. Since ancient times the moon has more generally been considered as 'male' (hence, the appellation of 'man in the moon'); its dark and light qualities are aspected in Wagner's opera as the old (unseen) king and the younger (visible) king who must become 'whole' *viz* healed and renewed, to full strength in order to yield the oceans into fruition, to inspire truth and vision, to think and know the truth. This wise head, the face we see in the moon, is none other than the significant head carried upon the platter by Grail maidens in the grail romance – Peredur. Wolfram in his own version of the Grail writes of the Fisher King: "at the time of the change of the Moon, his pain is great..."

**Perceval**

Chrétien's Grail Castle is the womb of rebirth, perceived by many esoteric scholars both ancient and modern in myth and history as resident within the sphere of the Moon, guarded by two kings – one of great age and one though old is younger than the former. Together they control the axis of this spinning castle, recycling souls in perpetuity both from and to the earth, all except those souls freed by gnosis. Mankind can thus achieve his destiny. Only self-induced apathy leads to impotence to act. This is the lesson of the Fisher king, of Orpheus, of the Gnostic Jesus and all other Lords of Higher Consciousness within the Greater Mysteries. Transcendence engenders *claritas*, a realisation free of anguish and ignorance, torment and uncertainty' Empowered by free Will, the aspirant shifts through grace from neophyte to crowned and resurrected or re-born 'king'. He becomes his own true self. Though Chrétien's unfinished tale does not reveal the attainment of this by Perceval (meaning: 'pierce through the middle', *ie* 'understanding'), his alter ego Parsifal in Wagner's opera does (*ibid* 428). It is indeed noteworthy at this point to emphasise the actuation of the grail, not as a cup, platter, head or stone, but the gnosis borne by its bearer, the realised soul! Essence and completion of life is in death a harmonic of unity of spirit and soul within the living body – alchemy of Truth. Parsifal's integrity and desire to truly serve proves him worthy of attainment; acting upon the purest of emotions, of spirit awoken in love, rather than acquisition, his 'celestial caritas' is assured within this highly moralistic adaptation (*ibid* 461).

The Grail hero is named variously as Perceval (in the earlier version by Chrétien de Troyes), or Parzival (by Wolfram von Eschenbach, the basis for Wagner's opera) and Galahad in the later Vulgate Quest. This young hero or neophyte is given entrance to the grail castle thereto encounter the mystery whereupon he is asked the meaning of the rites unfolding before him, which again closely parallels oriental tales in the *Panchatantra*, suggesting a common source or inspiration (Campbell 1991: 424). In both cases the correct answer heals the 'maimed' king and the young quester/aspirant 'becomes' the next guardian or keeper of the 'Grail'; in other words, a fully realised initiate, having become at-one within the pleroma of the





mystery. He is then able to preserve and maintain this knowledge for the next aspirant. It is attained only by he who understands, that is, who has achieved gnosis – apprehension of the truth. "Logos is deeper than Logic" (*ibid*). Succession is from one master/priest to his student/neophyte.

Essentially, they are to come to terms with 'being', its acceptance and continuity rather than interpreting literally the bizarre puzzle of the events within life as ordered by higher powers. They have to see, feel and know by direct and active engagement, not passive meditation, its resolution. Yet to inherit gnosis without the disillusion of the paradoxes of life and its incumbent 'wound', he must first understand the joys of existence; to lose these is to forfeit the power of the Will, manifest in the incapacity to act, to fulfil his sacred filial duties.

**The wounded king**

Returning our attention now to the Fisher King whose 'wound' has deprived his kingdom of abundance, we learn that his 'wound' too is a debatable and contentious issue. Is he lame or impotent? Chrétien makes clear the devastation of the land is due to the severance of the King's 'magical' attachment to it. Wolfram, however, later explains this as a 'psychological' binding betwixt the king and his kingdom, which Campbell (392-4) posits as the expression of Christian theology regarding the separation of an earthly paradise distinct from the heavenly abode of a transcendent God that enjoins immanence within the quester. Leading to alienation of the soul, it is cast adrift into the wasteland, desolate in a mute and sterile landscape of the body and mind. The inability of the Fisher-King and of Parzival (on his first attempt) to attain their True Will renders the world void of purpose and fecundity. Fruitfulness is reciprocated only upon realisation and recognition of the glory and purpose of the spirit on all planes in all spheres of being. Fulfilment equals enrichment and abundance – true prosperity of mind, body and soul. It is the jewel and the stone of sacred Alchemy, the wisdom of the sages, the Tabula Smaragdina; the potency of transmutation, the elixir of Will, enriched and reified by the gnosis of union. Immortal kingship is won in the 'Castle of Life' (*ibid* 567).

Chrétien's Perceval, the holy fool initially fails, losing the grail to innocence; he does not recognise the connection between the wasteland and the illness of his host, the Fisher king. Left unfinished, we are uncertain how Chrétien intended to conclude this legend. In Wolfram's Parzival the grail platter becomes a stone and the wasteland element is diminished along with its connection to the Fisher-King. The nature of the Grail is simply to heal the king, in which quest, Parzival is successful. In later Grail traditions, Perceval, experienced through the many trials of life finally 'sees' it, but only as it is grasped by Galahad in a completely Christianised version where the Grail is a Eucharistic cup. Religion has replaced philosophy, and it is now hereon in only attainable by the perfect, by the chaste and pure. This implicit celibacy represents the epitome of separation and disassociation with the divine feminine mysteries and union of the sacred godhead through and by his female counterpart, his life and death soul-mate (Jones 1988). Perceval is therefore able to heal his host, and thus succeeds him as guardian of the grail castle, though empty of it, thereto await its return (Matthews 1989: 163). But, it disappeared with Galahad's attainment of it, being the only 'perfect' soul, no longer to be saved and offered any other seeker, in continuous succession as before. Its knowledge and lineage is now hidden from us.

**Rich fisher**

In yet another analogy, Matthews (1996: 72) asserts how the Celtic tale of Brons, 'Grandfather' to Perceval and companion to Joseph, could be a probable precursor to the Grail legends and its relationship with a Fisher king. The premise of Brons' succession is the ability to 'feed' a large group of people from a single fish served upon a 'grail' platter. Brons is also a priest king who serves mass at a sacred feast within the grail Castle, itself an 'Otherworld' destination. The dish known within the *Estoire del Saint Graal* (Campbell 1991: 408) is conferred by Joseph to his successor (as keeper of the Grail) who will henceforth be known by the enigmatic and slightly distinct title: the 'Rich Fisher' (*riche pescheur*).

These themes are explored in Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1997: 110) where she expresses her belief that Robert de Boron was the only writer to make an explicit link between the title of Fisher King

with the position of Grail keeper. Furthermore, she dismisses all claims relating to the mundane implications of 'fisher', insisting upon its unmitigated allusion to mysticism. The sacred meal of Brons fed only the worthy and in this she seeks a parallel not with the Christian Eucharist but with the purity achieved by baptism of certain (Johannite) gnostics. Enigmatically, the 'Fisher' of de Boron's tale, though 'healed', 'dies' three days later, linking it firmly with the aforementioned sacramental orphic bowl of the sacred mysteries. She proceeds to reveal the fish as an archaic and divine symbol of all mystics relative to an extensive list of deities from Ea to Jesus (1997: 120-1). Certainly the fish is a symbol appropriated by Christianity, and it is known that Christ's apostles were also known as 'fisher's of men – the papal ring of fishermen, a metaphor of sacred priesthoods since time immemorial. It symbolises the light of salvation and enlightenment and could logically represent in the distant past a tribal/priestly totem. This view especially supports Weston's perception of these particular serpent priests as 'deities who lead men back from the shadows of death to life' (*ibid*). Indeed it was also considered to be the holy food of the Gnostics. Pressing further this assertion, she mentions the Jewish custom of eating fish as a sacred and communal meal, eating it in curious anticipation of the 'slaying' and 'consumption' of the mighty Leviathan at the end of time and partaking of its Bliss.

This is certainly closer to the mark than her proposal of additional links to fertility/vegetation cults of the Middle East and the attendant Mythos of dying and resurrected gods, especially when we consider the mythical aspects of maiming throughout the ancient world. Several major and numerous minor deities were known to be lame from Hephaestus to the Devil himself. Many though not all, were smith gods of metal working and agriculture. Both Aeneas and Jacob fathered great nations: the Romans and Jewish peoples respectively. In all cases, 'lameness' increased their virility, strength and generative power, but is also understood to be a punishment or curse for some lack, or act of perceived 'sin' (hubris). Strangely, deformity disqualified admission into the Jewish priesthood Yet again, if understood metaphorically, these physical abnormalities could be interpreted as indicative of the 'fall', of mortal failings and limitations. Marked by physical defects, these deities are a constant reminder that man no longer dwells in paradise, that perfection does not exist in mortal form. However, their excessive lust and vitality was even commemorated within the limping partridge and crane fertility dances of the ancient Mediterranean world into the beginning of the early centuries of the 1st millennium which have survived as pagan and folk dances believed to have inspired specific Morris and circle dances (http://www.univie.ac.at/cga/art/religion.html).

Given the extreme absence of these generative and vigorous qualities within the Fisher King, it suggests with greater certainty that the Dolorous Blow rendered his condition to one of impotence, as mentioned in the opening of this discursive study. What is axiomatic to the acquisition of the Grail in the earlier blending of oriental and occidental traditions is his role in this purpose. He is without doubt its keeper, and any approach must first be broached through him, the *Roi Pescheur*, quite literally priest king, in the archaic and gnostic tradition of the true seeker. Moreover, he can only be found in the otherworld bastions of initiation, the luminous temples of the starry heavens, above, beyond and within the metaphysical planes of being. No other theory presents such a perfect fit, so beautiful a premise or so desirable an attainment.

[*In fate and the overcoming of fate, lies the true grail* – Roy Bowers]

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# The Wasteland *Pamela Harvey*

In the story of the Fisher King and the land which will not bloom until his wounds are healed, there are certain obvious parallels. If we look at the modern world, and indeed look back through the paths of history, we cannot fail to see the Wasteland, together with various heroic attempts by Man to give it back its natural desire to blossom.

Perceval searched for the Grail, encountering the Fisher King. Did the sight of the wounded ruler of a barren land inspire him? To what? To find the hidden meaning of life; to look for the answer to his own problems and suffering, or to see, too, how the individual is connected to the land, and the world, to which they belong? We blame destiny for our misfortunes, but what if that destiny was meant to be much better; what if our human race is so wounded that we, as part of it, cannot fulfil the pattern originally possible? We are part of the Cosmos; does any of it, or anything or anyone, in it, beyond this sphere, actually care? In the distant past, many legends say, Gods came to Earth to guide the infant race of humans, to influence their difficult journey through the pitfalls and hardships of prehistoric Earth, even though it was not yet then a world torn apart by indifference, ignorance often deliberate, and greed.

The concept, in many religions, of Beings who leave more favoured states to help us in our struggles, is familiar to all of us. The Fisher King might remind Christians of Christ, or, for example, to Buddhists he might be compared with the Bodhisattvas, perhaps. It is, too, an old and metaphysical tenet of Paganism that links the ruler of a realm with the fecundity or barrenness of it and its peoples. But there is a harmony in nature which is always ready to try to repair or regain what has been lost. Given better climatic conditions fertility returns, crops flourish, and animals and people thrive and regain their health and strength – if nothing upsets the balance in the meantime. We are part of the natural order of Earth; we cannot disturb it radically, or ignore its warnings, without consequence. We do not need global warming to remind us that we have not been good custodians of our planet. Although, whatever its cause, whether human pollution or rhythmic and cyclic disturbance of planetary order, or both together, we are being reminded.

The Wasteland is evocative of sorrow, of deprivation. There is plenty of that around today. Everywhere, I can look back on my own life, and see a path which might have been different if life had allowed it, although I can see in the compensations a richer, deeper thread which only the denial of my original hopes could have given me. Somewhere in that is the mystery of the Wasteland, but my problems were not those of sheer survival, of starvation and consequent despair.

On the track of empathy with the Fisher King, there is a mystery of sorrow in which there is healing, of a sort, from a hidden spring which only exists in the wasteland. At first we might not recognise it, but eventually may realise we are less thirsty. And we may have a Companion who knows what we are going through and can stay with us, although it may take quite a while to realise this, too. But there are times which will offer strength.

**Grail**

Perceval sought the Grail; the ultimate treasure, probably more of spiritual than material value. Long before the Christian tradition, lost in the mists of history and prehistory, was it the focus of the search through the wilderness of life to a knowledge of Divinity or union with same? The Divine Light shines from the Eternal Centre of the Universe; in fact, even to our human sense it is always the present moment; the duality; of Time that passes and yet never moves – we, and Earth, move around the sun and the galaxy at fantastic speeds, but our consciousness registers only now. The Grail has always been with us – as with the ultimate peace, Nirvana, or Heaven, from which strands of light and energy binds the stars and planets in an intricate web. They are the rivers of Life which indicate that our world

is not alone, but is a bead on the cosmic string. Our unhappy fate – plunged by whatever unknown tragedy into ignorance of reality – which sees only our three-dimensional world, was something which perhaps those more enlightened could not leave quite alone. Perceval, in seeking the Grail, seeks what was meant to be – whether of God or Goddess, the lost world where human endeavour meant reward of knowledge and wellbeing. To Pagans evidence was/is important; even in Christianity faith was not necessarily at first expected (for example, remember doubting Thomas?).

**Guardian**

The Fisher King is a mystery of sharing, and the Wasteland is a lost world parched for the understanding of reality as well as for health, strength and compassion. The Grail holds, somehow, the answers, but will Perceval, or we, find any of them? Will we look hard enough? It is fact that it is easier to accept what is the popular norm of attitude of a secular society than to consider rationally the import of legend or 'fantasy'. It may take years to find convincing evidence for those on the treadmill of Science, but eventually they can share it with all of us. Let us not rule out life elsewhere in the Cosmos, or faeries, or UFOs...

Was the Fisher King an image of an ancient God, or of the Divine throughout history? Or the sad human guardian of the Wasteland, in any case a bitter fact of failed harvests, drought, famine, floods, or manmade disasters? A world desolated by such, as well as the ravages of war, is indeed our present world. Where is the Grail of Truth? Is a spark of its flame somewhere in all our hearts? ☙

*The man on the mere*
plunges hook into water
seeks again as every time to raise
out of weedtangle mudbottom
blade blighted him with ceaseless
cureless wound before became
dark water offering

oh if found at last if found
raised be cleaned and law of similarity
as rust-for-blood is lovingly removed so
weapon-bandaging will take pain it made

time after time a weight is caught
skill of long trying grown so fine
success comes with each cast
out of small surefloat coracle
but always is always nothing only
same great green knobble-monster

pike and always proffers from
fierce jaws same fine work rebound
of waters gold ring thrown as
bait-exchange-gift to lake lady

her beauty suiting to repay
if she give up her fast-held toy that
hurting-forever thing and always
spurned returned again nor ever yet
what could clear dry fog lift grey sky mask
recatch sun to regreen woundshare land

*Steve Sneyd*

*Simon Rouse*





# The Fisher King Questions

*Steve Sneyd*

**Did the Fisher King parade before Isis?**

As worship of the Egyptian mourning wife and mother goddess Isis spread out from its birthplace right across the Roman Empire, particularly after Rome's conquest of Ptolemaic Egypt, this mystery religion became as popular with civilians as the Mithras cult with soldiers. Inevitably, thus, it reached the trading cities of Roman Britain, paramountly London.

So it is certainly not impossible that, even if the faith itself could not have outlasted the dominance achieved by Christianity among the Britons in the late Empire and on after the end of Roman control of the island, memories of the processional ritual which formed the heart of the mystery could have lived on in distorted, folkloric, form.

Parallels within the Isis ritual's personae could therefore have potential as sources for elements of the Fisher King figure himself and aspects of his court.

However, while accepting, almost in passing, that Celtic lore was present in Chrétien's Grail story portrayal, Mircea Eliade (1987: 92-3) posits a specific direct classical source for the key descriptive elements, one known to have survived into the Grail writers time in at least one ms copy.[1] That source, found in a 2nd century novel by Apuleius, namely *Metamorphoses,* lies in its eleventh section, the Isis Book, describing the initiation of a selfish young man, a certain Lucius[2] into the Isis religion, to be "reborn" as one of its elect.

The *Encyclopedia*'s article discusses in great detail a range of parallels within this chapter (and within the *Asclepius*) to elements of Chrétien's description of events during Perceval's first visit to the Grail Castle: here, I will limit myself to that seen as the Fisher King source, namely the description by Apuleius of the Anteludia, *ie* the prelude to the Isis procession proper. Therein featured prominently "a fisherman with hooks": also present were a hunter with his hunting spear, a fowler, a sword, a golden cup, a couch, and a feeble old man. The article then shows how Chrétien's descriptions can be read as drawing together all these "persons and properties". This leads the author to the conclusion that "by welding these incoherent bits into one figure and linking it to ancient fertility myths and Celtic lore, Chrétien created an impressive figure of medieval literature." Suggestive indeed, if unprovable, but certainly yet another intriguing indication of how open to syncretistic interpretation, from far earlier and more distant roots, the Fisher King, as with so many elements of the Matter, can be.

***I caught one* sooo *big*. What was the Fisher King actually angling for?**

We first see the Fisher King out in his boat, hook baited, busily fishing. But what was he actually trying to catch? In fact, did he ever catch anything, or was fishing merely an attempt to distract from the pain of his never-healing wound?

[1] Albeit that was in Florence, far from the Grail writer's Northern location at the time, *ie* Bruges, the writer's speculation is that a further copy formed one of the items, along with, perhaps, a hermetic dialogue called *Asclepius*, traditionally ascribed to Apuleius, and also, incidentally, known to Marie of Champagne's court at Chartres at which Chrétien had earlier worked, which might have formed part of the book supplied by his then patron Count Philip of Flanders as source material for the Grail book – a parallel perhaps being how Holinshed's *Chronicles* served Shakespeare as inspirational crib.

[2] As an aside, a name with other Arthurian resonances, *inter alia* that of the Roman emperor Arthur supposedly fought against.

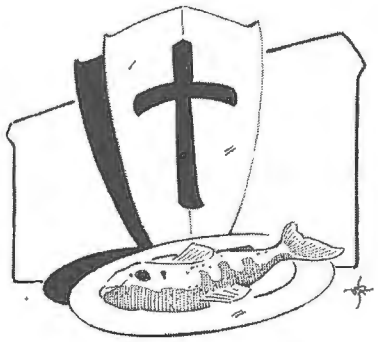
Given the frequent Celtic trope of the salmon of wisdom, it could be speculated that he sought to catch that fishy beast, in hopes of obtaining an answer to the dilemma of his suffering. Or, given the use by early Christianity of the fish as a coded symbol for Christ, that this was a representation of his religious belief, the faith helping him endure his suffering.

However, was he attempting to recover a particular object, one of great importance, which had been either lost in the waters, or more specifically, which he suspected had been swallowed by a fish? Stories of such recoveries are of great antiquity, a particularly striking instance being the tale of the tyrant Polycrates of Samos. His remarkable luck had come to worry him, since he feared that the gods would punish him horribly for what seemed like, in his irresistible rise to power on the island, unnatural good fortune, akin to the sin of hubris in that it had been something deserved only of divinities, not men. So, to atone, he hurled his favourite ring, of immense value, into the sea. The very next time he dined on fish, the sea creature, cut open on his plate, revealed in its stomach the ring, and Polycrates knew he could not escape his fate.

There is a British story, localised to Pickering in Yorkshire, just south of the North York Moors, which also includes the element of a ring recovered from a fish. It also features the man seen as the original source of the Perceval of the Grail story, namely Peredur (the name, indeed, he retains in the *Mabinogion* variant). That Dark Age British king of Evrauc, *ie* York, the story has it, swimming in the pond at Keld Head, the source of Costa Beck which runs through Pickering, lost the ring which was the source of his regal power. Later, fishing in the Beck, the king caught a pike which, on being served at table, when cut open revealed the ring in its belly, hence the name Pickering and the pike on the town's coat of arms.[3]

[3] Gordon Home, in his *The Evolution of an English town: Pickering* (J M Dent 1905) said "there may have been two British fortresses at Pickering in this time" (Home is here quoting Elizabethan antiquary John Stow for his account of the town's origins – after "Perederus, ruler from the Humber northwards", founded the town), "one on the site of the present castle and one on the hill on the opposite side of Pickering Beck, where circular ditches and mounds have been discovered" (my thanks to Roger Waddington for discovering this reference). The latter site has been suggested as that of a medieval siege counter-castle, but given the frequency of Norman recyclings of earlier fortifications, that would certainly not rule out Iron Age origins and Dark Age re-use for either or both.

So, given the association of Perceval to the Grail story, to which the Fisher King is central, had there been an intra-family transference of the ring hunt motif? That is, was the actual loser of that ring of power, and symbol of regality, originally not nephew, but uncle, and its loss a mark of, or even the cause, of the loss of powers reflected in the unhealed genital wound and the parallel lost of fertility of his realm, so blightedly become the Waste Land? Was it, or at any rate a fish that might have swallowed it, the desperately sought real objective of his vain fishing activities? ☙



*Simon Rouse*

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**Note**

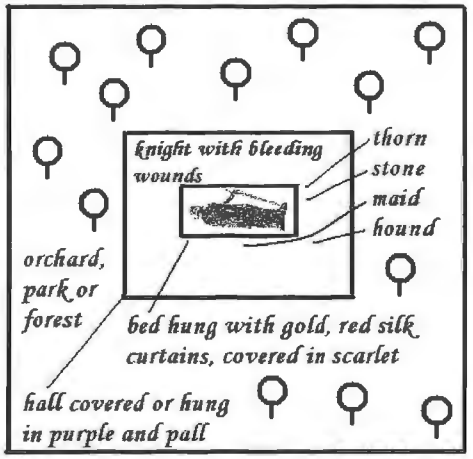
I owe information on the Pickering story to Ian Taylor's article "Ryedale Zodiac", in *Northern Earth Mysteries No 50* (Summer 1992) 7





# The Riddle of the Rich Fisher ☙ *Chris Lovegrove*

A Dürer




*The Corpus Christi carol* (c 1500)
*Lully, lulley, lully, lully, lulley*
*The faucon hath borne my make away*

He bare him up, he bare him down
He bare him into an orchard brown

In that orchard there was an halle
That was hanged with purpill and pall

And in that hall there was a bede
It was hanged with gold so rede

And in that bed there lieth a knight
His woundes bleding day and night

By that bede side kneleth a may
And she wepeth both night and day

And by that bede side there stondeth a stone
*Corpus Christi* wreten there on

*All Bells in Paradise* (mid-19th century)
Over yonder's a park, which is newly begun:
*All bells in paradise I heard them a-ring*
Which is silver on the outside and gold within:
*And I love sweet Jesus above all thing*

[three verses]

At the bedside there lies a stone:
Which our blest Virgin Mary knelt upon:

At that bed's foot there lies a hound:
Which is licking the blood as it daily runs down:

At that bed's head there grows a thorn:
Which was never so blossomed since Christ was born:

*Down in yon forest* (early 20th century)
Down in yon forest there stands a hall:
*The bells of paradise I heard them ring*
It's covered all over with purple and pall:
*And I love my Lord Jesus above anything*

In that hall there stands a bed:
It's covered all over with scarlet so red:

At the bed-side there lies a stone:
Which the sweet Virgin Mary knelt upon:

Under that bed there runs a river [flood]
The one half runs water, the other runs blood

At the foot of the bed there grows a thorn
Which ever blows blossom since he was born

Over that bed the moon shine bright
Denoting our Saviour was born this night

At the beginning of the 1500s a London grocer called Richard Hill busied himself in compiling a *Commonplace Book* in which he noted down a number of tales and ballads, possibly for the moral education of his young sons. Among these "tales and balattis" was the lullaby that we have come to know as *The Corpus Christi Carol* (though we have no idea of the tune it was sung to). This includes such strange, haunting images that after the text was first published in print in the early 20th century debate arose as to their meaning. And, because of the image of the bleeding knight, scholars and others began to recall the equally strange and haunting image of the Fisher King in the Grail legends.

*The Oxford Book of Carols*, first published in 1928, notes that "the mystical meaning of the fifteenth-century original was ... eucharistic" but goes further and suggests that various allusions in this carol (and two other more modern versions) "point to an interweaving of the legend of the Holy Grail". John Speirs in the mid-20th century similarly declared the Corpus Christi carol "surely the most original and poignant English rendering of the theme of the crucified Christ" before going on to state that "the inspiration is unmistakably the Grail Myth" (Speirs 1971: 77). Moreover, it "strangely recovers the original significance of the mortally wounded knight (of the Grail romances) as the slain god". Finally, Miri Rubin's view is that the carol presents a "complex and rich picture, accomplished from the weaving of the chivalric imagery of the grail and the hall and the eucharistic Christocentric iconography of suffering" (Rubin 1991: 141).

As we shall see, there can be no doubt as to the Christian imagery inherent in this carol, but as to whether the distinguished academics who associated it with themes from Arthurian romances are justified may be less certain. So what can this and similar carols tell us about medieval religious concepts, their pagan antecedents and their relationship with Arthurian tales? Or do we have here a clear example of what Richard Barber (2005: 363) calls "argument by false association" where if "two acknowledged facts appear to have something in common, they must be connected"?

**Meaning**

The imagery of *The Corpus Christi Carol* is clearly related to its modern analogues, *The heron flew east* (Scottish, early 19th century), *All bells in paradise* (North Staffordshire, 1862) and *Down in yon forest* (Derbyshire, early 20th century). Only *Down in yon forest* has survived with its music; apart from *The heron flew east*[1] most of the texts are reproduced above. In all of them we have an enclosed area with trees (an orchard, park or forest) in which is found a hall (hung or covered "in purple and pall"). In the hall there is a bed hidden from view with gold or red material. There are incidental details which can vary (a thorn, a stone, a weeping maid, a hound).

As Rubin remarks, *The Corpus Christi Carol* is simultaneously a lullaby sung by a mother to her baby, a medieval romance, a liturgical text and, above all, a riddle: though the modern texts give no clear answer, at the end of the 1500 text we are explicitly told that the bleeding knight is *Corpus Christi*, the Body of Christ. Though some of the correspondences are a little ambiguous, it seems that we are invited to identify a church setting, in the middle of which is possibly an altar, on which is placed a liturgical vessel (such as a ciborium or paten) covered over with red or purple cloth (associated liturgically with, respectively, martyrs and penance, especially the period of Lent). The vessel contains the Body and Blood of Christ (usually commingled during the Communion), but the outward appearance of bread and wine is mystically seen as a wounded knight. The figure can only be Christ: as *The Mass of St Gregory* (Dürer's contemporary print illustrating a vision during mass of the wounded Christ in his tomb) shows, we're meant to be contemplating the meaning of the wafer resting on a paten covering a ciborium or chalice.

The feast of Corpus Christi, instituted in the early 13th century, was the

[1] Speirs (1971: 79) gives the refrain as "The heron flew east, the heron flew west, / The heron flew to the fair forest"; he also draws parallels with the rhyme of the children's game *The Key of the Kingdom*.





culmination of a long and lasting interest in the doctrine of the Real Presence, especially by lay religious women called Beguines. One, Juliana of Cornillon, had a vision showing a full moon with a blemish, interpreted as a missing feast in the liturgy of the church which Corpus Christi was to fill. Side by side there was an intense devotion to the suffering Christ, with the wounds inflicted during his Passion such as those made by the Crown of Thorns. These concepts kept their spell over the faithful, right up to and including the Reformation.

How does this all relate to the Fisher King, the Dolorous Blow and the Wasteland? Simply put, very little, despite the suggestions of distinguished commentators. Here I would like to postulate that there are three strands of imagery running through the songs, and that these are similar to but not the same as the motifs that contribute to the make-up of the mysterious king of the Grail legends. The strands of imagery in the songs are related to a rural lifestyle (orchard, forest or park, falcon or heron), then to chivalric romance (the hall, the knight, the hound) and finally to religious symbols (the richly-coloured materials, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Corpus Christi): this much is undeniable.

The motifs in the Fisher King story are related to these strands, but not so clear cut. These three motifs in the composite picture of the Fisher King that has come down to us are (1) the king whom we first meet fishing in a boat on a river; (2) the ailing or maimed king whom we meet in the Grail Castle; and (3) the ruler of the wasteland. As we shall see, the three motifs are not universally present in all the Grail stories, and there is not even always an explicit connection between them.

**The King, the Blow and the Wasteland**

Scholars generally now agree that the Fisher King has no specific Celtic antecedent. Chrétien de Troyes is the first to introduce Perceval (and us) to the mysterious fisherman (Bryant 2006: 35f). Perceval is looking for his mother, and expects to find her on the other side of a fast-flowing river, in what he believes is the Waste Forest. He sees two men in a boat anchored in the middle of the stream, with the one in the bow fishing with a small fish as bait on a line. As there is no crossing for miles, and it is getting late, the fisherman directs Perceval to his own house, which turns out to be more sumptuous than expected. We are later told that because of a disability this "rich fisher king" can't "manage any other sport" but instead goes fishing in the manner described.

In essence, that is all we learn from Chrétien's account about the significance of this king's sport. We might surmise that to see a lord fishing with a line is unusual enough for Perceval to be given an explanation, but due to the romance's unfinished state we will never know whether Chrétien intended to make more of this motif. He may have meant it to be a reflection of the reality of a disabled ruler's existence or he may have simply had in mind the injunction given by Christ to Peter the fisherman to leave his profession and become "a fisher of men", so that Perceval is seen as an emerging Christian. Or, as *Perceval* is self-evidently a literary fairytale, the fisherman may merely be a typical fairytale helper, such as one sees in profusion in the Breton story *Peronnik*. Chrétien however gives us real no hint that the there may be an esoteric meaning to the fisherman's pastime: Wilson suggests that Chrétien "may well have given the king the occupation of fisherman, since he might seem in need of an occupation ... and there are few so suitable for a crippled king living by a river" (1988: 135).

There have been bold attempts to link this figure with pagan heroes or deities (the classical Orpheus, for example, or Nodens in Roman-British mythology). John Grigsby (2002: 7) believes that "at heart the Grail legend is connected to both sacrifice and a lost mystery rite ... that had originated not in the Classical world but in the Celtic". At the root of this latter approach is what later became known as the Dolorous Stroke or Blow.

Chrétien recounts how Perceval is told that the fisherman "was wounded in a battle and completely crippled, so that he's helpless now, for he was struck by a javelin through both his thighs" and "can't mount a horse" (Bryant 2006: 41). For any ruler this was potentially a disaster, especially when it came to waging war. That this injury through the

thighs was a euphemism is clear from vivid accounts of the Battle of Hastings: Harold was stabbed, beheaded, disembowelled and had his "leg" cut off at the thigh and carried away: this last action was so censured by Duke William that it can only refer to his genitalia being removed (Wood 1981: 228). Such brutality was, sadly, so commonplace that we could accept Chrétien's account as merely reflecting reality, if it were not for the version that Robert de Boron produced of Chrétien's *Perceval*.

Robert's elaboration of Chrétien's story included giving the anonymous king a name as well as a title: before meeting him Perceval is told that he is "entered upon the quest of the Grail that Bron your grandfather has in keeping, he who is called in many countries the Fisher King" (Skeels 1966: 46). It is the combination of name and maiming that, some suggest, most clearly link Robert's grail story with Celtic mythology.

In *Branwen*, the second Branch of the *Mabinogion*, Bendigeidfran ("Blessed Brân") is wounded in the "foot" by a poisoned spear in a battle with the Irish. Mac Cana and others argue that this detail, plus a probable reference to Bran as Morddwyd Tyllion ("The Pierced Thigh"), point to this being "a perfect antecedent to the wound in the groin or the thighs ... which incapacitated Chrétien de Troyes' Fisher King and several other Arthurian characters whom scholars derive from the Welsh Brân" (1958: 163-4).

Many will remember Malory's description of the Dolorous Stroke (or Blow) with a spear in "The Knight with the Two Swords": "For the dolerous stroke [Balin] gaff unto kynge Pellam thes[e] three contreyes ar[e] destroyed." In Malory's lifetime the incapacity of kings did put the good governance of the country in jeopardy, so this tale did have resonance for his audience. Now 'Pellam' may well be a 15th-century version of Robert's 'Bron' and of the Welsh 'Brân', and so one may well be looking for a causal connection between the Stroke and the Wasteland that followed all the way back to early Welsh mythology. However, such a link may not always be present – in the third *Mabinogion* Branch, *Manawydan*, Dyfed becomes a wasteland not through an unfortunate blow but through an enchantment brought about by motives of revenge – so it must not be assumed to be a given in the grail tales.

Despite all these provisos, there does seem to be a number of overlays on early oral tales: first Chrétien's romance, then Christian interpretations in subsequent romances, and finally the various modern speculations, some scholarly, some rather more imaginative; and it may well be that there is more to the original oral tales than meets the eye, but for us now those pieces of the jigsaw may be forever missing. ☙

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# What did Arthur drink? *Dave Burnham*

*Simon Rouse*

A year ago in a local pub I noticed they sold a Sir Lancelot Bitter. Enquiries revealed that there had been a few different Arthurian draft beers for sale including Sir Kay and Sir Galahad among others. They had been brewed throughout 2005, a different knightly beer each month, by Bank Top, a small local brewery. I decided immediately to chase up these Arthurian beers, but before that, a question occurred to me. *What did Arthur and his knights actually drink?* Looking through the usual sources, there is no definitive answer to that question, either in Arthurian history, literature or legend. Drinking, unless it's a problem, is mentioned rarely in Arthurian literature, except as part of feasting. Plenty of Arthurian tales begin or take place on the several holy days of the year, all of which are feast days. So the gathered knights must have had something to drink. But what? Usual standbys such as Lacy's *Encyclopaedia* are silent and no appendices in Arthurian books I have consulted mention drink at all.

It's not that alcohol has ever been a scarce commodity – presumably the very ubiquity of alcohol makes it hardly worth mentioning. So when referred to at all in Arthurian literature it is by the by, although occasionally alcohol obtrudes into part of the narrative. Geoffrey of Monmouth, for instance, in his *History of the Kings of Britain* paints an unflattering picture of Uther Pendragon's drinking habits.[1] Uther when he saw Ygerna's beauty at the Easter feast in London 'kept sending his own personal attendants with golden goblets of wine' for her, no doubt using the practice of the scoundrel over the centuries, trying to get her drunk before making his move. The next line confirms that he's trying it on as 'he kept smiling at her and engaging her in sprightly conversation'. Geoffrey does not offer us her reaction but one imagines Ygerna, like women down the ages, was used to the attentions of leering men with high opinions of themselves. Of course as soon as Gorlois saw what was going on, he dragged Ygerna out of Uther's presence and left London. Uther, never a temperate man, fell into a (drunken?) rage and 'collected a huge army…' The rest, as they say, is legend. Malory, usually a direct, even cruel, commentator on people's baser characteristics has Uther down as a lecher rather than a drunk.[2] *Le Morte D'Arthur* opens with Uther being distracted by lust for Igraine. Igraine clearly had no stomach for it and advised her husband that they should go before there was trouble. But of course the very leaving caused trouble as Uther was 'wonderly wroth' at their departure. Other writers treat Uther's attentions as a grand passion more than an inebriated try on. Mary Stewart for instance in *The Crystal Cave*[3] has Uther so smitten people thought he was bewitched – nothing to do with inebriation at all. And of course in Arthurian legend when people lose their minds or act out of character, the supernatural is usually the primary cause, not drunkenness. For Stewart, by the way, the only alcoholic drink was wine.

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[1] Thorpe, L *transl* (1966) *Geoffrey of Monmouth: History of the Kings of Britain* (Penguin)
[2] Matthews J *ed*, (2000) *Thomas Malory: le Morte D'Arthur* (Cassell)
[3] Mary Stewart (1970) *The Crystal Cave* 32

Chrétien de Troyes in *The Story of the Grail (Percival)*[4] uses alcohol as a key narrative device, but the spilling of it rather than the effects of it. The Red Knight from the forest of Quinqueroy has threatened to take Arthur's lands. As the two men talk Guinevere joins them to give succour to some wounded knights. 'The knight would not have angered me by words alone', says Arthur, 'but he snatched away my cup and lifted it so insolently that he spilled all the wine in it over the queen'. The Red Knight takes the cup away and the queen returned to her chambers in 'dreadful fury and grief' with Arthur worried she would not come out alive, so great was her humiliation. As no one, not even Arthur himself, was prepared to take this brute on, the youth Perceval, who happens to be at court for the first time, takes a fancy to the redness of the Red Knight's armour and asks Arthur if he can have it if he catches and defeats the bully and returns the golden cup. Arthur gives his blessing and Perceval's career begins. Of other mediaeval romancers, Layamon mentions 'wine and ale' for feasts but not in much detail.[5] And the Christmastide feast that sees the appearance of the sinister Green Knight starts well with dishes of fine meats and 'Dayntes' and 'Good ber and bryght wine both'[6].

But of course, if we want to know of the historical Arthur's taste in drink, Chretien, Layamon, the *Green Knight* author and Malory cannot help. By the time they were writing, European trade was better established than it had been in the fifth century. How freely available was wine in those earlier centuries, in the heart of the Dark Age? Gildas, unsurprisingly has something to say on the matter, but if he names no Arthur with his Badon neither does he mention any type of drink with his, 'if any monk through drinking too freely gets thick of speech, so that he cannot join the psalmody, he is to be deprived of his supper'.[7] On the Saxon side of the early mediaeval British cultural fence is some confusion. At the beginning of *Beowulf* there is frequent allusion to mead[8], 'mead benches' and the 'mead hall'. Curiously nearer the end of the poem there is mention on a couple of occasions of wine, once in relation to a queen drinking it and once, mention of a 'wine hall'.

That grand and bizarre tale, *Culhwch and Olwen*, begins with the youth Culhwch determined to meet the giant Ysbadadden Penkawr's requirements for his daughter Olwen's hand in marriage. Wisely he visits Arthur and his extensive war band in order to seek their help. As he arrives they are, of course, feasting. "The knife is in the meat, and the drink is in the horn, and there is revelry in Arthur's hall, and none may enter therein but the son of a king of a privileged country, or a craftsman bringing his craft. But there will be refreshment for thy dogs, and for thy horses; and for thee there will be collops (slices of meat) cooked and peppered, and luscious wine and mirthful songs". This is Charlotte Guest's translation, from fourteenth century manuscripts. It is suggested that linguistic evidence indicates it took its present form by the 11th century.[9] But how much wine would there have been in 11th century Wales?

**Medieval drinks**

I had to look to different types of source for some sort of answer to the question. There are several histories of alcohol and there is a surprising amount known about production and availability. In the early middle ages there were three sorts of alcohol available.

[4] William Kibler *transl* (1991) *Chrétien de Troyes: Arthurian Romances* (Penguin Classics)

[5] W R J Barron, and S C Weinberg (1989) *Layamon's Arthur: The Arthurian section of Layamon's Brut* (Exeter University Press)

[6] *Gawain and the Green Knight* (*c* 1400) line 129

[7] Monckton, H A (1966) *A History of English Ale and Beer* (The Bodley Head)

[8] Saemus Heaney (1999) *Beowulf* (faber and faber); the date of the composition of Beowulf is frustratingly vague, with the earliest possible date being the middle of the seventh century.

[9] Jeffrey Gantz *transl* (1976)"Culhwch and Olwen" from *The Mabinogion* (Penguin)





First of all, **wine:** ancient, lauded by poets from classical times and the drink of preference of the powerful. Wine has the pre-eminent reputation amongst alcoholic drinks because it offers several benefits.

- It is a relatively strong drink – between 9% and 14% volume,
- it keeps if stored properly for months if not years,
- as sugar production is part of the fermentation process wine (along with honey, and the tragically short seasonal fruits) offered until the modern era one of the few solaces for a sweet tooth.

The combination of sweetness and intoxication is the true source of its popularity, giving in one cupful sweet comfort in a difficult world. Because it was such a special product wine had from earliest times been associated with religious ritual, whether the rumbustuous tradition of Bacchus, or the more sedate use of it amongst the Egyptians. The use of wine at the Mass lent sanctity to wine across the Christian world and in early mediaeval Britain, whose climate is so antagonistic to viticulture, both the church and the powerful clamoured to get hold of secure supplies.

Records from the Anglo- Saxon period demonstrate its importance. Bishop Aidan of Lindisfarne in 738 granted his monks an allowance of wine and in the tenth century Ethelwold allowed his monks a large bowl of wine from which their *obbae* (pitchers) were filled twice a day, for dinner and supper. But it seems that wine was not always available. Alcuin, of York, a counselor to Charlemagne in the eighth century, wrote of the situation in Jarrow to an Irish colleague, 'but woe is me. There is death in the pot, oh, man of God. The wine is gone from our wineskins and bitter beer rageth in our bellies.' It must have been the case that commodities imported sometimes were in short supply (and therefore expensive) because of the vagaries of shipping. This is confirmed as late as the tenth century by a conversation reported in *Aelfric's Colloquy*.[10] A young man reports that he drinks 'ale, if I have it, water if not', but does not drink wine because he is 'not so rich that I can buy me wine,' adding that it is a drink for elders and the wise. Hyams quotes (from *Aelfric's Colloquy*) a seventh century Saxon trader as importing, 'rare garments and spices, wine and oil…', but 'bringing it 'hither and thither, with great danger over the sea and sometimes I suffer shipwreck with the loss of all my goods, barely escaping with my life'[11].

But importation was not the only source. The Roman peace, once established in lowland Britain in the second century, allowed attempts at growing vines. The acceptance and spread of Christianity will no doubt have spurred locals to produce their own supplies of the base material for priests to turn into the Blood of Christ. Would the production of wine have survived the collapse of Roman order in Southern Britain? Possibly, but by the seventh century the Saxons, following the Christianity introduced by Augustine in the South and Aedan in the North, had caught onto the idea and by King Alfred's day vineyards in Wessex were commonplace enough to be mentioned in his law code. By the time of the Domesday survey there were 38 vineyards in Southern England, as far north as Ely and including such vine friendly territory as Westminster and Holborn. So perhaps Arthur's table included local wine – although of course the powerful will always want to swank, so the 'superior' and exotic imported variety, if available, would probably have been preferred.

Secondly there was **mead** – metheglin, as it was sometimes called – made from honey. In the dark ages when forestation was greater beehives were plentiful in woodland, meaning honey, in small amounts at least, was, with a bit of effort, easily obtainable across the social scale. Later the formal management of beehives gave landowners a regular supply. Despite the attractions of honey as a sweetener for food, and a sweetener that keeps, Banham suggests that most honey was not used in foodstuffs but

[10] John Watney (1974) *Beer is Best* (Peter Owen, London)

[11] Edward Hyams (1965) *Dionysus, A Social History of the Wine Vine* (Thames and Hudson)

saved for the production of mead.[12] The singular way that honey is produced severely restricts the amount that could be produced – making both honey and mead relatively expensive compared to ale. Mead was certainly drunk by the elite in preference to ale, but was usually second choice to wine.

Lastly, but of overwhelming importance was **ale.** King Alfred's view was that for the kingdom of Wessex to be run properly men needed land to live on…weapons, and ale and food and clothes…'[13] This is not to suggest the English were all drunks. Ale, a weaker brew than we order at the bar today, was the cheapest, most frequently available and, perhaps most importantly, the safest drink available. Water supplies, corrupted by either human or animal waste, sometimes represented a serious health hazard. Milk was only available seasonally, mead was expensive and wine both expensive and sometimes not available. Ale, in the form of the sugars in it, also provided a considerable source of nutrition. However ale was and is a dull drink – whatever the strength. So from the very earliest days of ale in Mesopotamia it was often seasoned with different additives. Wild rosemary, coriander, ginger, aniseed, juniper berries, even wood bark were early additions for flavour. We have only the thinnest of evidence of any flavourings used in ale in the early middle ages.

At the end of the seventh century King Ine of Wessex set out a comprehensive list of laws including tax arrangements, in which are mentioned three types of ale – clear ale, mild ale and Welsh ale. In the same laws payments in kind were set out for ten hides of land (*ie* as rent) which included a fine list of produce, including 'three hundred loaves, twelve ambers of Welsh ale and 30 ambers of clear ale, two full grown cows…' and so on. Unfortunately it is not certain what Welsh ale was and why it was different from clear and mild ale. It might just refer to ale as that drunk by the Welsh, or other 'foreigners' or slaves. That might imply it was less desirable than clear ale – was it cloudy? But it cannot have been considered inferior because the pricing in Ine's laws makes Welsh ale more expensive. Clear ale by the way, in the centuries before finings were added to beer to clear it artificially, would probably have been sour, having 'cleared' naturally because it was days or weeks old. Twelfth-century Welsh records show that rent payments in alcohol included mead – *medd* in Welsh – the most expensive drink, *cwrwf*, ale, the least valuable and *bragaut* – which comes down to English as 'bragget' – which was a wheat beer flavoured with honey. As wheat is easier to malt the very earliest ales were made from wheat, suggesting that this *bragaut* may be a descendent of a very early brew. This may well have been 'Welsh Ale', something the Jutes and Saxons had never come across before.[14]

Although ale was the daily drink of the populace not all ale was weak and not all ale was drunk as simple refreshment. St Boniface wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury, one Cuthbert (740–758), that 'it is reported then in your dioceses the vice of drunkenness is too frequent'. And drunkenness, as ever, was considered a scourge. King Edgar (959–975) tried to stem the tide of it by closing ale houses, decreeing there should be but one in each village, and best of all, enacted that drinking horns should have a pegs placed down the insides and instructed each drinker not to take a draft beyond the next peg down. The traditional mode of communal drinking was that for each group of drinkers a four pint horn was passed from hand to hand each taking a draft. Seven pegs were fixed into the approved horn, indicating that each drinker had to be restricted to a half pint draft at a time. This ambitious, if seemingly doomed piece of social engineering looks like an early version of the attempts to curb drinking made during the Great War – when again national efficiency was seen to be being seriously undermined by drink. The government enacted licensing laws restricting opening hours to a lunchtime interlude and an evening session ending

[12] Debbie Banham (2004) *Food and Drink in Anglo Saxon England* (Tempus)
[13] H A Monkton (1966) *The History of English Ale and Beer* (The Bodley Head)
[14] Martin Cornell (2003) *Beer, The History of the Pint* (Headline)





at 10.30 – the hours which dominated the twentieth century. Less remembered today is the attempt made, at the same time, to outlaw 'treating'. Treating was how getting your round in was known then, and the tradition of each man buying a round was thought to contribute to a drinking frenzy.

Two other types of drink are worth commenting on, although neither is mentioned in early mediaeval records. Orchards were only introduced to England by the Normans and the word **cider** itself at the same time, from the French *sidre*, but its production was age-old. Caesar certainly found Kentish men drinking it on his two summer jaunts to Britain and reference was made to it by Charlemagne. However, without the managed husbandry of the orchard, the sweetness and therefore the broader attraction of cider were compromised by the native variety of apple available at the time, the crab apple, which was tart rather than sweet. It may also be that apples, along with pears, the only native fruits which were storable into the winter (up to December or January), were more prized as winter foodstuff than for cider. But there is a semantic confusion here. While the English word for beer, *bior*, came to be used in the sixth century, there was another Old English word *beor*, which seems to have been used for fermented fruit rather than ale. With words almost indistinguishable were ales and 'ciders' regarded as almost interchangeable?[15]

Neither is there mention of any **spirits,** easily produced from wheat grain. Although evidence of distillation comes from third millenium BC Babylon, the alcohol produced was used in perfumes and later for colouring metal. The still with cooled collector, necessary for the efficient distillation of spirits, was an invention of Jabir Ibn Hayyan (721–815). He described the flammable vapour produced as "of little use, but of great importance to science". The poet Abu Nuwas (*d* 813) describes a wine that "has the colour of rain-water but is as hot inside the ribs as a burning firebrand". Distilled alcohol first appeared in Europe in the mid-12th century among alchemists, and claims for the genesis of specific national beverages such as whiskey can be taken seriously from that time onwards. So it's probable that no spirits were available to Arthur.

**So go to a pub in Bolton...**

So go to a pub in Bolton called the Howcroft Inn and look at the collection of beer labels over the bar; all the beers, it is claimed, ever sold in the Howcroft. Twelve of them are named after Knights of the Round Table, all brewed by Bank Top. There are not many other British beers with Arthurian names. There is a Pendragon Ale brewed by Hampshire Brewery (Strong Ale, ABV 4.8%)[16] and there are two Merlin Ales reported, one brewed by Broughton Ales and one by Ceredigion Brewery.

Bank Top is part of a phenomenon of the last third of the twentieth century – the return of tiny local breweries. Opened by John Feeney in September 1995 the brewery has been gradually expanded over the years. During the summer of 2002, the brewery moved to their current location.[17] If this location (pictured) looks like a 1950s-style tennis pavilion, there is a reason for that: it's a 1950s-style tennis pavilion. Until 2006 it looked out on a set of mouldering tennis courts, but this year the ground was turned into a piece of attractive parkland. The pavilion is very much the showcase and once through the front door visitors find themselves in a tiny bar, at which John Feeney shows off Bank Top's wares. The serious action takes place beneath and behind this edifice.

[15] http://www.drinkfocus.com/apple-cider/history-of-cider.php
[16] http://www.bottledbeer.co.uk/index.html?beerid=42
[17] http://www.banktopbrewery.com/ales.htm

John Feeney first made his beers public at the internationally renowned Bolton Beer Festival (sponsored by the Howcroft). He had been an avid home brewer before then, keeping his buckets in the cupboard under the stairs. Bank Top is now a public limited company and Dave Sweeney helps John run it. Bank Top brews 14 regular beers, well known locally but now sold across the country. Regular beers brewed include the wonderfully named *Bad to't Bone*, and the rather edgier *Old Slapper* and *Arse o'er Tit*. John and Dave are confident of the future of the Brewery because of the sophistication of their market research tool – their own taste buds. 'If we don't like it we don't make it again,' says John.

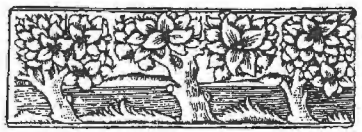
The Arthurian set of beers includes:

Sir Belvedere 4.0%,
Sir Bors 4.2%,
Sir Galahad 4.2%,
Sir Gareth 4.2%,
Sir Gerwain 4.0%,
Sir Kay 4.2%,
Sir L'Amorak 4.2%,
Sir Lancelot 4.0%,
Sir Mordred 3.6%,
Sir Pelion 4.5%,
Sir Perlinore 4.2%,
Sir Tristram 4.2%

So why Arthur's Knights? John Feeney has long hair and a beard and is in his fifties. He still rides a motor bike and his cultural roots as a biker are hard for him to disguise (even if he wanted to). So is he in league with Arthur Uther Pendragon – another Arthurian biker in his fifties? Nothing quite so romantic I'm afraid. John explains, 'We were looking for a set of names to use in a series of beers, 10 or twelve of something to give us the opportunity to brew a set over a full year. I thought we could do Blues singers, but the Blues doesn't really resonate with British beer does it? We wanted something traditional, interesting and names which people were familiar with. I hit upon the idea of Knights of the Round Table and rang up Manchester Central Library asking who the 12 Knights of the Round Table were.' That John thought there were twelve knights is an understandable misapprehension. Didn't Charlemagne and Jesus have twelve followers? Why not Arthur too? He was astonished when the librarian informed him that there are 150 or so names of Knights of the Round Table. This must be Malory, who in his grand work mentions Knights in abundance. John Feeney said he pictured the Round Table at Winchester and could not imagine 150 men sat round it. And of course, do the maths and a Round Table to seat 150 people, given a yard of space for each adds up, using my 'O' level maths, to a diameter of nearly fifty yards.

So the names of the beers were agreed and they were produced across the year 2000 and repeated through 2005. Will they be brewed again? Well, who knows, but probably not by John who will be retiring soon. He'll be taking his bike and his missus from Chicago down Route 66.

**So are we closer to knowing** what Arthur drank? What drinks were available in silver pitchers placed at intervals on the Round Table or poured delicately into golden goblets lissom though demure samite-clad noble-women? First choice would have been wine, the sweeter the better and, for preference, it would have been a rich red – indistinguishable probably from the wine used in the Mass – unless the supply had failed and a thinner local wine would have to have sufficed. If that wasn't available there would be mead: thick, sickly sweet and intoxicating, the fruit of almost all the honey produced in Arthur's hives. Thirdly and probably not available at the feast table because it was too mundane, came ale. The clear, slightly sour, weak brew would have been the daily fare of the servants and others. But perhaps ale flavoured with meadowsweet or honey would have had a place at the feast as a standby. Cloudy ciders would have been available in autumn, strong as a horse, but without flavouring tart rather than sweet. And possibly squires, porters, grooms, and the like would have had their own session in the kitchen, or local ale house, with newly brewed strong ale. So they didn't go short.







## Reviews

Poetry
Sally Purcell
**Collected Poems**
Anvil 2002 £12.95
0856463388

I first encountered Sally Purcell's work in the collection *Lake and Labyrinth* in the late 1980s, and was struck by the way it combined density and allusiveness with an oddly light, lyrical touch. Her later collection, *Fossil Unicorn*, published just before her early death in 1997, deepened the sense of her as a classicist with its paraphrases from Propertius and Virgil, and I welcome and endorse this *Collected Poems* wholeheartedly. The addition of over 70 scattered pieces and a preface by Marina Warner both add a lot to her earlier work. Purcell's subjects, largely mythological, are often approached from a deeply personal and passionate perspective. 'Lancelot at Almesbury', for instance, sees both the knight and the queen retired from the world, and ends "In a place too cold for tears, I leave her / neither cross nor ring / but a branch of white hawthorn."

In a world where many poets seem to spend more time publicising their work than writing it, these are poems to read and read again. "Gratefully I add a stone to your cairn," she writes elsewhere, "green island in the shadow of God's thought, / and travel on". A rare treasure.

*Geoff Sawers*

Radio
**Malory: a Tale of Two Texts**
BBC Radio 3, August 27, 2007
Presented by Prof David Wallace
Producer Paul Quinn, extracts read by
Poet Laureate Andrew Motion

As with so much on radio, an attempt was made to cover too many aspects of the topic, any one or two of which could easily have filled the times lot. Nevertheless, there was much of interest in this programme, which took as its start the discovery in the 30s, in the library of Winchester public school, of a pre-Caxton manuscript of Malory.

There was an amusing anecdote of how Eugene Vinaver, already working on editing the only original copy of Caxton's book left in England, at its home, Ryland's Library in Manchester, at once on hearing the news of the find, rushed south. He interrupted a lunch for distinguished old boys – called Wykehamists, apparently – attending a cricket match, to drag the librarian off to show him the manuscript at once, talked him into allowing an instant loan (clearly a much more trusting and less regulation-bound age), then rushed back to Rylands to "compare and contrast" – the first time since both were in Caxton's printery that mss and book had been under the same roof.

An intriguing connection, albeit one briskly whisked over, was that the woman Vinaver employed to transcribe the mss before its return to Winchester (where it briefly went missing at the train station!) later became George Orwell's wife.

Next the listener was transported to the British Library, the manuscript's purchaser from Winchester: the mundanely christened Additional MS 59678 was, in effect, brought to the mike by Helen Cooper of the BL to be described, if not actually interviewed! Its colourfulness was pointed out, all proper names being rubricated, *ie* picked out in red; they shouted from the surface like, in a vivid description, a herald announcing participants in a tournament, particularly in the final roll call of Round Table knights before the break up, nicknamed by BL staff "Malory's telephone directory"; amusingly, among the potted bios of knights in this section, a scribal error had turned the Mont St Michel giant's genitalia – as high as Arthur could reach up him to deal the fatal stroke – into a Round Table member.[1]

Smudges on the actual mss showed it had indeed been in Caxton's works, though how these inky "offsets" gave such precise proof wasn't explained. We got a quick character sketch of the two scribes involved, as revealed by their marginal annotations, Scribe A of mystical tastes, Scribe B clearly a lover of blood and gore. Regrets were expressed over what was missing from the ms as found, including the sword-in-the-stone scene, and this led to a high-speed outline of the differences between mss

[1] My pun, not theirs!

and printed book in terms of content. This went well beyond the well-known way the publisher unified an anthology of tales into a continuous narrative to comment on how Caxton toned down the graphic descriptions of violence, particularly in the long bloody account of the war with Rome (in the process, also smoothing away alliterative "fossils" which had survived in the ms from a non-French Malory source, the English *Mort Artur* poem). They speculated that, whereas when Malory wrote the Wars of the Roses were still vivid contemporary news, Caxton was trying to suit a later readership weary of war and longing for times of peace: hence the need to tone down and "civilise" the violence. Fascinatingly, but all too briefly, a possible example of political bet-hedging by Caxton came up: that, while in the ms Arthur's dream included a "grimly bear", Caxton changed it to "grimly boar" – the symbol of Richard III – and enhanced the dragon it fought, the symbol of Henry, the Tudor claimant, soon to win at Bosworth Field. That Malory's multiple references to his own position as a prisoner while writing were reduced by Caxton to very brief start and end comments was also seen as political caution, reminders of his author's dubious involvements not just in multiple criminal accusations but in the fighting politics of the dark days of internecine conflict, likely to damage hopes of royal patronage.

Then it was onto the evidence that Malory was held in Newgate rather than, as one of his rank would normally have been, in The Tower – namely his presence as a witness along with the prison's Keeper, Roger Clifford, a priest, *etc*, as witnesses at the deathbed of Edward Vinton, Gent, in a document found in that gaol's surviving Cartulary or record archive.

That led to the speculation that the description in Malory of Sir Tristram's sickness in prison could have been based on personal witness, even illness of his own, there. The guess was made that, normally lacking intelligent company, Clifford the Keeper might well have revelled in that of Malory, and so made his life easier, including facilitating his obtaining reference books as sources for the Morte. These could have come from the nearby Paternoster Row Stationers, and the further guess was made that, shrewd businessmen, they might well have allowed him the use of them free, in exchange making copies of his translations as instalments were completed, to sell to their own benefit and perhaps his, to pay for prison luxuries.

But still there was much more to come – an account of Towton, bloodiest battle ever on English soil; more dead even than the first day of Paschendale, was given on the basis that its raw violence, including the mutilation as well as robbery of corpses, as far as could be from illusions of chivalry, was so vividly reflected in the ms that Malory had either been there or had eyewitness accounts.

There was a whizz through the story of the Winchester Round Table, hook being that Malory's reason for setting Camelot there was that he might well have seen it: this included the curious discovery that, underneath the 18th century King Arthur figure, x-rays showed a precursor notably resembling Henry VIII, the 1516 repainting he ordered thus clearly including an attempt to reinforce the Tudor claim to descent from Arthur – "see how like him I look" – the presenter imagined Henry saying to the Emperor Charles V when showing him the artefact during that emperor's English visit.

And then came discussion of Victorian royal use of Malory, including subtle censorship of Dyce's paintings of Arthurian scenes for the Queen's Robing Room to suppress hints of Catholic sympathies and adultery, and that it was Victoria's husband A1bert who





suggested using the Matter, having seen how successfully the new German Empire drew on that people's national epic, the *Nibelungenlied*, for unifying symbolism.

Breathlessly, the programme even managed before the end to bring in the use of Malory as a symbol, particularly the final slaughter of Cam1ann, of the human meatgrinder of the WWI trenches, with Arthur Rackham's illustration of that battle for a wartime edition of the *Morte* unmistakably evoking Flanders with a link back to Winchester and the toll among its 1914 pupils – and to, contrastingly, how T E Lawrence tried to make the Arab uprising in aid of the Allies he guided a chivalrous conflict, influenced by his own obsession with Malory, a copy going with him everywhere in the desert.

A thoroughly intriguing programme, then, well worth the listen, but sadly lacking in room for its content (and participants) to breathe – and expand on and further explain – as the rich material so thoroughly deserved.

*Steve Sneyd*

## Comics

**Mystic Arcana: *Black Knight***
Overseen by David Sexton
Art by Tom Grummett, Scott Hanna and Michelle Madson
Framing sequence art by Eric Nguyen
Marvel Comics $2.99 (£1.99)

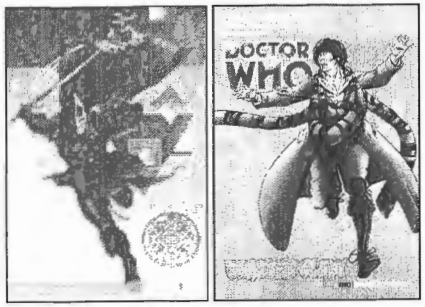
David Sexton is a Tarot designer who has got himself the job of overhauling the magic within the universe of Marvel Comics. This started with a series of single issues focusing on individual characters. The framing sequence for these one-shots is that a character who previously appeared once in 1983 is searching for four objects mentioned in a 1981 Conan comic.

The first of the one-offs was a missing adventure for Magik (a heroine from the New Mutants, now dead) set in ancient Egypt. The second is a re-telling of the life of the Arthurian era Black Knight. This has been reworked to have the young Percy given to the Celtic god Gwynn who dictates his fate.

The usual characters are here: Merlin (with what looks like a pet iguana), Arthur, Mordred (Percy's cousin) and Morgana Le Fay (here Mordred's wife). The writers chose to ignore the suggestion from a *New Excalibur* issue of only six months previous that had others holding the post of Black Knight before Sir Percy. In this issue's framing sequence the quest takes the young Ian McNee to Avalon (here a higher realm) in search of Morgana. To be honest, I would have preferred the main story to have focused on her back-story, but I suppose the Knight is a more bankable character.

This is an interesting take on a second division player in the Marvel Universe. As for the line (which reads like a cross between DC's *Books of Magic* and ABC's *Prometheus*), I'm looking forward to how it progresses.

*Cardinal Cox*



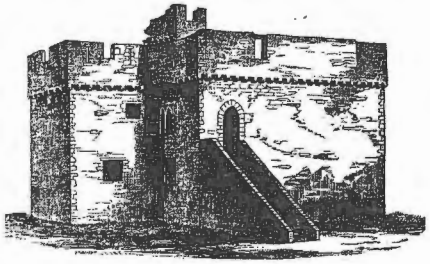

Dave Gibbons, Steve Parkhouse and Steve Moore
**Doctor Who: *Dragon's Claw***
Panini January 2004
978-1-904159-81-0 PB 162 pp

*Collected Doctor Who comic strips Vol 2* (published as a Panini Books graphic novel in 2004) contains one short Arthurian story, 'Neutron Knights'. The *Tardis* is summoned by a magician to a castle in which the last humans are besieged by warlike mutants. When the mutants break in, the magician activates a nuclear fission device and bundles the remaining humans into the *Tardis*. As their leader sacrifices himself to buy them all time, the Doctor overhears the leader and magician refer to each other as 'Arthur' and 'Merlin'.

The *Tardis* then dematerialises as the device detonates, and the Doctor comes to, lying on a forest floor with no-one around. The comic strip ends with

Merlin reappearing to him as a faint vision, promising that they will meet again sometime. Written by Steve Parkhouse and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, both of whom went on to make their names on *2000 AD*, this 8-page story was first published in *Doctor Who Monthly* in 1981.[2]

*Anonymous Prosographer*



From the archives

John Darrah

**The Real Camelot:**
**Paganism and the Arthurian Romances**
Thames and Hudson 1981 [£4.95]

*The Real Camelot*, as its author makes clear from the start, does not deal with any aspect of the historical Arthur, but with his mythological 'court' – that strange and varied collection of old gods and cult figures which the magnet of his myth has attracted.

John Darrah suggests that many of Arthur's entourage – Launcelot, Gawain, Galahad – are in reality much older than their adopted king, that they are in fact pagan cult figures, associated with ritual aspects of a primitive religion. This idea is not new, as he admits, but his originality lies in the use of very late texts – 12th to 15th century – to support his ideas. "What is, I believe, new is a serious attempt to follow the ramifications of these themes in the French versions of traditional tales which underlie Malory's Camelot; a demonstration of the relationship of the themes to known deities, and a demonstration of their association with artefacts contributive to native cults."

Using Malory, Chrétien de Troyes and the various Grail Romances, the author claims that pagan themes and ritual acts have been preserved, unrecognised, and have finally become part of the later legends. He admits the lateness in time of his sources, but is convinced of their importance, and quotes an example of such a lingering tradition in Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of the moving of the Giant's Dance eastwards over the sea. This certainly seems a garbled but strangely accurate folk-memory of the coming of the Bluestones to Stonehenge.

In the romances are certain recurring motifs; perhaps the most obvious is that of the Challenge given by a passing knight to one who perpetually guards a sacred site – fountain, tree or well – which the author relates to Frazer's mysterious priest-kings at Nemi, who reigned only until they were killed by another. There are many others – echoes of Annual Kings, the Waste Land and the Dolorous Stroke, with all its hints of fertility ritual; the Grail, the Round Table itself – all of which are re-interpreted as aspects of pagan cult practices.

Darrah suggests that names like Launcelot and Galahad represent not individuals but offices; the human representatives who carried out these rituals in the name of such gods as Bran, Beli, or Mabon. The pagan elements incorporated into Arthur's own history are also considered, and the final proposal of the site of the real 'Camelot' is both highly plausible, and the logical result of the author's reasoning.

For such a complex thesis the book is excellently set out, is scholarly without being pedantic, is vivid, fast-moving, and benefits greatly from a generous selection of apt quotations from Malory and the romancers. The points of the argument succeed each other with admirable clarity, and even on the rare occasions when the theory comes perilously close to guesswork, the associations of ideas are ingenious and always fascinating.

In short, this is a book which may become a minor classic for anyone still questing for the "real" Camelot.[3]

*Catherine Fisher*

[2] Merlin reappears, as part of a mysterious "coalition of higher evolutionaries", in the seven-part comic strip "The Tides of Time" (again by Parkhouse and Gibbons). Serialised in *Doctor Who Monthly Nos 61-67*, it is now available in *The Tides of Time: Collected Doctor Who Comic Strips Vol 3*. ☙
More interaction between various Who incarnations and Arthurian storylines can be seen at
http://www.bbc.co.uk/doctorwho/classic/episodeguide/merlin.shtml
http://www.marvunapp.com/Appendix/doctorwh.htm
http://www.whoniverse.org/biography/OrderM.php





Julian Munby, Richard Barber and Richard Brown
**Edward III's Round Table at Windsor: the House of the Round Table and the Windsor festival of 1344**
The Boydell Press 2007 £35.00/$65.00
*Arthurian Studies vol 68* HB
978-1-84383-313 0 282pp illus

Historical re-enactments have always been popular, especially in the late 20th century, from the Society for Creative Anachronism in America, through English Civil War society The Sealed Knot and Dark Age re-enactment group Britannia in more recent years, to the 500th anniversary of the last great tournament in Wales (which was celebrated at Carew Castle in Pembrokeshire in May 2007). Sir Rhys ap Thomas, a supporter of Henry Tudor, marked his admission to the Order of the Garter with what became known as the Great Carew Tournament in 1507, and appropriately enough his family's poet, Rhys Nanmor, compared Carew Castle to King Arthur's palace.[4]

But the enthusiasm for historical re-enactment goes back much further back than this, as a new book based on detailed documentary analysis and recent archaeological excavation shows. This fascinating study of a fantastical building takes a suitably multi-disciplinary approach, with its contributors including both the head of Buildings Archaeology and a Senior Project Manager at Oxford Archaeology, plus two experienced historians with overlapping expertise on the Middle Ages, Windsor Castle and the Arthurian legends. That building was the House of the Round Table at Windsor, built and then abandoned in the mid-14th century for plausible reasons explored fully and very clearly in the text. This short-lived yet extraordinary structure, 200 feet across, was intended to inaugurate a Round Table Order, with tournaments recreating imagined Arthurian ideals in a fusion of literary, political, architectural and social engineering. Sadly this never-completed British Colosseum was effectively forgotten after the victory of Crécy, and the mammoth Round Table Order it was meant to celebrate was jettisoned in favour of a slim-downed Order of the Garter (151-2).

Supplemented with documentary appendices and splendid illustrations, this in-depth study explores the historical background to a modern archaeological discovery, detailing its analogues and inspirations, ultimately revealing that role-playing games are nothing new; it can't be praised enough.

*Chris Lovegrove*

[3] This review first appeared in *Pendragon XV* No 4 (1982) 22-3, the theme of which was "Ritual, Romance, Reality"; John Darrah has also written *Paganism in Arthurian Romance*, published by D S Brewer in 1997 (0859914267 HB 320 pp)
[4] "Tournament memories carved in wood" *Pembrokeshire Life* (April 2007) 16; Eric Fitch "Edward III's Round Table at Windsor" *Pendragon XXXIV* No 1 (2006)

## bookworm

The death of **Lloyd Alexander** in May this year at the age of 83 was recently announced; the Philadelphia-born author was best-known for his **Chronicles of Prydain** series, children's novels which are rooted in Welsh traditions, as exemplified by the *Mabinogion*. The first, *The Book of Three*, was published in 1966, and was followed by *The Black Cauldron* (also the title of the 1985 Disney cartoon of the first two books), *The Castle of Llyr*, *Taran Wanderer* (Taran is the principal character in the Chronicles, beginning as an assistant pig-keeper) and *The High King*. Alexander found Wales, where he was briefly stationed during the Second World War, a magical place:
"The beauty of this ancient, rough-hewn country fascinated me. To my eyes it was still a realm of bards and heroes; the Companions of Arthur might have galloped from the mountains with no surprise to me. I seemed to recognize faces from all the hero tales of my childhood. Not until years later did I realize I had glimpsed another enchanted kingdom."

According to *Wikipedia*, in describing the influences on his writing, Alexander once said, "Shakespeare, Dickens, Mark Twain and so many others were my dearest friends and greatest teachers. I loved all the world's mythologies: King Arthur was one of my heroes." His Prydain books deservedly remain available in paperback editions. He successfully wrote other fantasy series for young readers, all generally characterised using "settings from the past as a way of exploring contemporary struggles". Alexander himself declared that "an openness to compassion, love and mercy is as essential to us here and now as it is to any inhabitant of an imaginary kingdom".

Several of **John and Caitlin Matthews**' books have entered a "recessive shadow" (including the forthcoming Folio Society title ***King Arthur***) they report; the latter has been delayed and will not be arriving until Spring 2008. You need to join the Folio Society in order to receive your own copy by writing to The Folio Society Ltd, 44 Eagle Street, London WC1R 4FS, or see www.foliosoc.co.uk. ***Arthur of Albion*** is John's book of stories "for all ages" based on the older Celtic world of the Dark Ages. The text is illustrated by Russian artist Pavel Tartanikov: the artwork is now completely finished but the publisher wants to bring it out for the Christmas market, which means that it will be now be published in September 2008. John is just about to sign the contract to produce what will, he hopes, be a series of Arthurian graphic novels. Provisionally entitled **The Chronicles of Arthur**, these will be illustrated by well-known graphic artist Mike Collins, who has illustrated *Dr Who*, *Green Lantern* and many others. "John and Mike have been talking about his for 10 years, so they are both delighted to be finally getting under way," according to a recent issue of *Hallowquest Newsletter*. The first volume will appear sometime in 2008/9.

"My Holy Grail is to end the seven-book series and know I was really true to what I wanted to write," **J K Rowling** is reported to have declared before ***Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*** (Bloomsbury) was recently published. Without giving away the plot, there are a number of parallels in this and the previous books between the careers of the young Arthur and Harry Potter (quite apart from obvious details such as the expletive "Merlin's beard!" and Albus Dumbledore's Order of Merlin honour) which numerous websites explore. The final volume includes a sequence involving a white hart (signal of a magical quest in Arthurian tales) and, yes, a sword in a lake.

Amateur historian Adam Ardrey claims that, after 6 years of research, he can now reveal that Merlin lived in the Partick area of Glasgow, in what is now Ardery Street, with his wife Gwendolin from 600 to 618. In ***Finding Merlin: the truth behind the legend*** (Mainstream £12.99) we're told that Merlin was born in 540 in the Cadzow area of Hamilton and buried by Duniplace near Stirling.

Roger White's study of the "lingering" survival of Roman Britain, ***Britannia Prima***, is published by Tempus (9780752419671 £19.99 or £16.99 from the Tempus website). Subtitled "Britain's last Roman province" this provocative view of this corner of the Roman Empire is available in paperback; see this issue's Old News for further background. Finally, the Scholarship category of the 2007 **Nebula Awards** given by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America was won by an Arthurian item, "Gemstone of Paradise: The Holy Grail in Wolfram's *Parzival*", by Jesuit priest G Ronald Murphy.[5]

Phil Emery's ***Sirens*** (2006), Philip Reeves' ***Here Lies Arthur*** (2007), Simon Young's ***AD 500*** (2005), those new translations of ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*** and ***The Mabinogion***, and reviews both from the archives and of classics are all yet to come!

*Chris Lovegrove and Steve Sneyd*

[5] Julia Eccleshare "Lloyd Alexander" *Guardian* July 6 2007; Margalit Fox "Lloyd Alexander, author of fantasy novels, is dead at 83" *New York Times* May 19, 2007; *Ansible 239* (June 2007); www.lloydalexanderbooks.com; Phyllis D. Morris "Elements of the Arthurian Tradition in Harry Potter" in http://www.harrypotterforseekers.com/articles/elementsofarthur.php; "Merlin 'from Glasgow not Camelot'" news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/scotland/glasgow_and_west/ and Nebula Awards item in *Ansible 241* (August 2007)






## COURT CIRCULAR

In Cheshire the Frogg Manor Hotel (which sounds like an establishment in *The Wind in the Willows*) offers "a treehouse with glamour" named after Arthur's queen. From £260 a night, including chocolates, champagne and a continental breakfast, **The Lady Guinevere Suite** offers a lavishly royal experience; plus "outside you can lie in a hammock and soak up the view". And presumably your Lancelot can climb up for a midnight tryst. Ring 01829 782629 if you're feeling romantic or log on to www.froggmanorhotel.com

**Nancy Dell'Olio**, famously linked to former England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson, was universally quoted when her biography, *My Beautiful Game*, appeared serialised in the *Daily Mail* in May. At the beginning of her relationship with Eriksson, when she was already married to another man, "I kept thinking of the legend of King Arthur, whose queen, **Guinevere**, fell in love with Sir Lancelot. I felt we were a trapped triangle. I knew both men loved me and that only I could make the choice." Needless to say, the media made the most of this revelation.

Back in 2003 plans were announced to build a £25m wind farm in one of the most deprived areas of Wales, to be called **Pendragon Fach Wind Farm**. The proposals for 20 to 30 generators on the hills surrounding Cwmtillery in Blaenau Gwent surprised local people, though the construction company Pennant Wind Energy Ventures Ltd offered £4m for community spending spread over 20 years. By September 2005 however the plans were withdrawn after local opposition to what were seen as potential eyesores, but the developers then said they intended to submit another smaller-scale proposal.

The new proposal emerged a year later, restricted to only four turbines, but local opposition focused on issues of noise, shadow flicker, property devaluation, environmental damage and threat to wildlife. No new developments have been noted since.

More on faux Arthurian enterprises in Tintagel emerges in a new zine called *Paper Cuts*, where all those search engine key words seem to have found a home. They include **King Arthur's Car & Coach Park** (£1.00; one can understand the coach, but a car?) and **King Arthur's Arms** pub (where he might sup from the grail perhaps), the **Camelot Amusement Arcade** (where you can be robbed by one-arm bandits) and **Merlin's Gift Shop** (ditto, perhaps), though **Excalibur Gifts** seem to specialize a tad too much. **The Round Table Restaurant** seems to have the right idea, but above all, when in Tintagel do visit **The Pendragon Tea Rooms** – it's a must.[1]

## EVENTS

The **Tintagel Visitor Centre** usually plays host to at least one historical re-enactment every year, and 2007 was no exception. **The Battle of Camlann** (traditionally Arthur's last battle) took place over three days in early August, with battling, archery and falconry displays, competitions and the usual panoply of stalls and attractions. For further information on such events call 01761 471730 or visit www.tintagel-show.com

One of the National Trust's special offers is a reduced-price entry to **The Arthurian Centre** at Slaughterbridge in Cornwall: on production of page 7 of *The National Trust Magazine* summer 2007 issue you would be entitled to 50% off, until May 2008. You are invited to "discover King Arthur's famous stone, at the site of his last battle," as well as

[1] "More fun in the trees" *Observer Escape Supplement* July 22 2007; Chuck Connor "Back to the Roots" *Paper Cuts No 1* (May 2007)

seeing the Arcadian garden, dating from 1730. Contact the Centre on 01840 212450, or visit www.arthur-online.co.uk

The **Society of Ley Hunters** was featured in *The Observer* when it visited the island of **Lundy** in the Bristol Channel for one of its twice-a-year trips to ancient landscapes in the British Isles. The Society includes druids, pagans, geomancers and sceptics (according to the descriptions in the article), who all investigate aspects of earth mysteries. Lundy was of course inhabited in the post-Roman period (inscribed stones can still be seen there) but includes monuments from several eras.[2]

## SCREEN NEWS

In TV channel Five's US series import ***Criminal Minds*** (a two-parter beginning February 15) the murder suspect leaves the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit clues about their next victim ("rather self-defeating" comments a preview). The twist is that the serial killer has "a 15th-century obsession" with grail mythology, resulting in "much questing and riddles". One character complains, knowingly, "Come on, are we in the middle of an Indiana Jones movie?" and the producer has been quoted as saying that the show itself is deliberately "Arthurian in nature".

Ian Brown spotted a repeat of the "charming yet utterly unbelievable" ***Midsomer Murders***, on ITV1 early in August. In an episode entitled "**The Fisher King**" the storyline involved "a completely unconvincing barrow (which was obviously a temporary structure covered in Astroturf; but never mind the criticism), in which had been found a Celtic cup and lance head, and the murders and intrigue around that find. References to the Holy Grail and the Fisher King were made with regards to a supposedly pagan rite at the Summer Solstice, to bring fertility back to the land, and to hopefully save one character's flagging marriage." Ian kindly offered not give away whodunit, adding that "the programme was all harmless fun and, of course, decidedly far-fetched."

[2] Gemma Bowes "Spirits, sacred stones – and how to dowse your aura" *The Observer Escape supplement* 6-7

Ian also managed to catch an episode of the BBC comedy quiz ***Have I Got News for You*** in which there was a mention of the biggest known wild pig yet killed in America (shot by a nine-year-old boy). It was a huge black boar, ten feet from snout to tail. It reminded him of **Twrch Trwyth**, "although," he adds, "if it's a descendant of his, that's something of an ignominious end, compared to being hunted by King Arthur's men." More, perhaps, next time.

Nicholas Crane followed in the footsteps of a literary giant in a new episode of ***Great British Journeys*** (BBC2, September 11). In "Gerald of Wales: Journey through Wales (1188)" the presenter traced Gerald's account of an attempt to rustle up manpower for a crusade to the Holy Land, throwing a little light on this entertaining writer who, incidentally, is credited with some independent early references to Arthur.

On the big screen the cartoon ***Shrek the Third*** (U cert) fell short of expectations, according to press opinions, but its interest here is down to an unexpected Camelot connection. Director Chris Miller originally intended to re-write Malory with the concept that the green giant was "really responsible for the Arthurian legend". In the end the only survivors of the jettisoning of this grandiose plot are the characters **Artie** (Justin Timberlake) and a "neurotic New-Age" **Merlin** (ex-Python Eric Idle), with the latter playing the role of a *Tempest*-like Prospero when Shrek and his companions get shipwrecked on a mysterious island. In the 2007 *Observer* reader vote for the top 50 comic movies ***Monty Python and the Holy Grail*** (1975) reached 8th position, with accolades such as "endlessly quotable", "the perfect showcase for the Python talents" and "the true Python masterpiece".

***The Tiger's Tail*** was critic Philip French's Film of the Week in early June. Directed by John Boorman, *The Tiger's Tale* follows *Excalibur* (1981) and other films by the director in following recurrent themes and situations: "Quests, encounters by rivers, dreams merging into reality, symbolic temptations, concepts of honour, man's divorce from nature, the conflict between free will and destiny". His "1965 debut, *Catch Us If You Can*, was," French comments, "a criticism





of the hedonistic materialism of its time. It saw a malaise haunting the land in the same way as it tainted Arthur's Britain. Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* underlies almost everything he's done," including, it's implied, his latest film.[3]

## CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

In last issue's BookWorm missing quote marks obscured the fact that copy related to John and Caitlin Matthews' books was in their own words and not editorial. Some of the text in the Reviews section appeared rather faint – hopefully this didn't cause legibility problems. And in "Lanval and the Otherworld" details of Italo Calvino's *Italian Folktales* (Penguin 1982) were unfortunately omitted. Observant readers have probably already silently amended other minor layout and typographical errors.

## JOURNALS, SOCIETIES, EXCHANGES

Ða Engliscan Gesiðas, or The English Companions, was founded 900 years after the Battle of Hastings with the aim of bringing together all those with an interest in the Old English/Anglo-Saxon period (roughly 450-1066). All aspects of the foundations and growth of English culture are covered, including language and literature, archaeology and anthropology, architecture and art, religion and mythology, folklore and material culture. Forty years on its quarterly *spell* or journal ***Wiþowinde*** ("Bindweed"), ably edited now by Karl Wittwer, contains reports of meetings and activities of its membership (approaching 500), articles, reviews and news of relevant archaeology, scholarship and silly-season items.

***Current Archaeology*** bills itself as 'the UK's bestselling archaeology magazine' – presumably a contest it has won with the Council for British Archaeology's aptly-named six-times-a-year periodical *British Archaeology* – and in its 40th year goes from bi-monthly to monthly. With nearly 20,000 subscribers it scarcely needs *Pendragon* approbation, but there are now twice as many reasons to explore British archaeology from an independent viewpoint, covering the whole gamut from the Palaeolithic to the 20th century, not forgetting the frequent mentions of Britain in the first millennium AD. Details are available from Current Publishing, Barley Mow Centre, 10 Barley Mow Passage, London W4 4PH (08456 44 77 07 and archaeology.co.uk ☙

*Chris Lovegrove and Steve Sneyd*

[3] Sara Cannon "Gentle giant is all heirs and graces in third film" *Western Telegraph* June 27 2007; "Ogre's going off-colour" *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*; Top 50 Comic Movies in *The Observer* July 22 2007; Philip French "Me and my shadow" *Observer* June 10 2007

Sample price / annual subs (overseas subs)
"Cheques payable to" – *e-mail or website*

**Caerdroia** *Annual journal of mazes and labyrinths* UK £7.00 (Europe €10.00 USA $15.00) "Labyrinthos", Jeff and Kimberly Lowelle Saward, 53 Thundersley Grove, Thundersley, Essex SS7 3EB *www.labyrinthos.net*

**The Cauldron** *Paganism, folklore, witchcraft* £3.50 / £14.00 "M A Howard", BM Cauldron, London WC1N 3XX *www.the-cauldron.fsnet.co.uk*

**Hallowquest** *Caitlin & John Matthews' publishing and teaching programmes* £8.00 (£16.00) "Caitlin Matthews", BCM Hallowquest, London WC1N 3XX *www.hallowquest.org.uk*

**Meyn Mamvro** *Cornish ancient stones and sacred sites* £2.50 / £7.50 "Meyn Mamvro", Cheryl Straffon, 51 Carn Bosavern, St Just, Penzance, Cornwall TR19 7QX *www.meynmamvro.co.uk*

**Northern Earth** *Journal of the Northern Earth Mysteries Group* £1.95 / £7.50 (£10.75 EU, £14.00 RoW) "Northern Earth Mysteries Group", John Billingsley, 10 Jubilee Street, Mytholmroyd, Hebden Bridge, W Yorks HX7 5NP *www.northernearth.co.uk*

**The Round Table** *Occasional Arthurian poetry and fiction* Alan & Barbara Tepa Lupack, The Round Table, Box 18673, Rochester NY 14618, USA (enclose IRC)

**The Newsletter of the Society of Ley Hunters** *Patterns within the landscape* £10.00 (£18.00 non-EU) A Hyde, 7 Mildmay Road, Romford, Havering, Essex RM7 7DA *leyhunter@ntlworld.com*

**Wiþowinde** *Periodical of the English Companions: Anglo-Saxon literature, history and culture* £3.50 "Ða Engliscan Gesiðas (The English Companions)", BM Box 4336, London WC1 3XX *www.tha-engliscan-gesithas.org.uk*

# Pendragon Jubilee

## 2009 ☙ *Dave Burnham*

Merlin woke. He knew he had been surfacing for a while, but now, at last, his mind was clear and he could sense the warmth of sunlight through his eyelids. He kept his eyes closed though, preparing for the shock of light, readjusting to wakefulness after such a long time in those worlds of dreams; gathering his thoughts; considering his options.

Suddenly a voice boomed out at his side. 'Jubilee!' It was so loud and so clear his eyes sprang open unbidden. 'Jubilee!' repeated another, a male voice this time, older, sterner. Merlin looked round. He was in a grand hall, an oaken table at its centre, gaily clad figures ranged around the table. He himself lay at the centre of table, surrounded by the clutter of a finished meal, strewn with papers as well as plates, bowls and glasses. Looking down, oh how his joints creaked, he saw the faces and figures so close he could almost smell the aroma of the flesh and wine on their breath.

'We have to celebrate Pendragon's Jubilee,' said a small man with a beard, quieter now, earnestly addressing two women opposite him.

'And what's a Jubilee, when it's at home,' said one of the women, young, fresh-faced, smiling.

'Something to do with 50 years,' said her companion.

'Listen', said a tall man at the end of the table. 'It's Jewish. According to Hebrew Scripture a Jubilee is a year of rest to be observed by the Israelites every 50th year, when slaves were to be set free, alienated property restored to former owners, and lands left untilled. Catholics are offered a similar deal in a Jubilee year, when plenary indulgence may be obtained by the performance of pious acts.'

'And what's that got to do with us?' said the young woman.

'It's just that in 2009 the Pendragon Society's 50 year's old. It'll be our Jubilee.'

A young long-haired man leaned right forward, nearly pushing his face into Merlin's. 'Jess Foster got interested in Arthur in the late 1950s, yes? She said that at the time there seemed so many books being published about him she wondered why. So she investigated. And her investigation led to the establishment, in her native Winchester, of a youth group, which did all sorts of things with a focus on remembering and celebrating King Arthur. Jess moved to Bristol, restarted the group, and stumbled in 1966 across the beginnings of the dig at South Cadbury.'

Merlin bridled at this. He remembered South Cadbury with distaste from a very long time ago. He opened his mouth to speak, but the dust of centuries clogged his throat.

The bearded man continued. 'And that was very special. Pendragon made that dig. Not that the professional archaeologists thought so. Leslie Alcock and his colleagues got quite irritated with us sometimes. We were also involved from the beginning of Glastonbury – we had a tent at the 1971 Glastonbury Fayre – and that was only the second festival on the Eavis farm. The Society developed, has had bad times and good times, but has always been there, attracting over the years a starry cast of Arthurians; academics, mystics, maidens, the son of one real knight, the occasional charlatan and wizards by the bucket-load.'







He stopped and another bearded man, more authoritative than the others, chimed in. 'And Pendragon is one of the longest continually operating Arthurian societies in the world. So Pendragon's once and future history is worth celebrating… That's why we need to prepare for the Jubilee.'

Merlin tried to get up but his movements were creaky and slow. Eventually he gave up trying to get off the table and contented himself with sitting up. He cleared his throat.

'OK, so what are we going to do?' It was the young woman.

Merlin spoke then. *Well, if you'll listen to someone who actually knew Arthur'* His voice was rusty but he could feel the old persuasive resonance of the base notes. *You'll stick to the original idea. So first of all I propose that in 2009 all Pendragons should free their slaves, leave their lands untilled and perform a series of self abasing acts of piety.* He sat back at that waiting for the response.

But there was no response. Instead another, older, balding man piped up, completely ignoring Merlin's words. 'We could have a simple, jolly get together, a gathering of people who've grown to know each other through Pendragon. And I'd love to go to Caerleon again.' The man sat back pleased with himself. Merlin turned on him, beginning to realise something was wrong. *In my experience private symposia keep newcomers out – you'll need something more inclusive for something as important as the Jubilee.*

Everyone else ignored him, and he knew that Nimue's magic had only half worn off. No one could see him, or possibly even hear him. He'd have to shout. *Something like that's bound to alienate friends as yet unknown and feel too cliquey for people who haven't participated before. We're all shy at heart, so offer something more attractive.*

Someone else said, 'I agree about a simple get together. We could go back to Baskerville but this time start earlier, order sandwiches for a lunch break and book the hall for the evening too where we can have people doing their music, poetry and stories. But perhaps it'd be better go somewhere new.'

'What about a book of writings covering the history of the society?' one of the bearded men suggested. 'We could add Arthurian musings and scholarship over those fifty years. Or perhaps we could produce a Graphic Novel of Arthur's life or Pendragon's life? We have enough artists, we have enough writers'. *That's better,* shouted Merlin into the young woman's ear, *I love the idea of a book showing '50 years of Pendragon'. It would be a fantastic commemorative keepsake.*

'That's too much to ask,' said another woman, at the far end of the table. 'You might as well build a float and try and get it accepted in the Lord Mayor's parade.' *Too elaborate,* thought Merlin, and that's exactly what the young woman said.

'What about a physical commemoration of the life and work of Bill Russell, and/or Jess Foster – a slightly larger version of the commemorative bench that grace so many of our parks these days. We could commission this, have a ceremony and then a get-together.' *I like benches,* thought Merlin, closely followed by the young woman saying precisely that. 'Or a poetry festival,' said the thin woman. 'There are any number around anyway.' *Not keen on a poetry festival,* said the young woman for Merlin, Arthur's Magician being convinced that any versifying should be done by him and him alone.

'Let's think big,' said a grave, stocky man with a lisp. 'Let's go for a tour of Arthurian sites around Britain. This would have to be on a commercial footing to attract paying customers and would require a lot of organisation, effort and commitment, but it would be good fun.' *Fantastic, but probably too expensive,* said Merlin's spiritual amanuensis next to him. As she said it she squinted in his direction as if she could see something. He blew into her face and she pulled away sharply. 'Or an Arthurian investiture at one of those places which offers jousting in the lists as part of the family entertainment.'

'Good grief, that sounds tacky,' said long hair. 'Maybe,' said one of the beards, 'but a presence at a grand mediaeval castle does have its attractions.' 'Family entertainment?' said Merlin's young woman. 'Does that mean I have to bring the kids? We've taken the kids to watch jousting before and they

got bored very quick. It was raining though.' Merlin realised she was speaking without his aid. A relief that, because he thought he'd left his own children centuries before.

'But if we want atmosphere,' said the long haired man, 'let's go to Camelot Castle in Tintagel. They do discounts for things that have an artistic leaning. I'm sure if we explained we are an Arthurian group we might get a good deal…'

'…and we could visit the castle, the village, that museum and St Nectan's waterfall and it would be interesting to new members.' *Tintagel's not all it's cracked up to be, and that Gorlois is still loitering there, damn' fine determined to get his own back on me…* Merlin held his thought then – he couldn't really allow the young woman to spout all his musings. Some of it was getting a bit personal.

'Or Glastonbury,' said a round woman. 'We could visit the Tor, the Chalice Well and the Abbey.'

'We could sponsor the prize money for a horse race,' offered the baldyman. 'The Lamrei Stakes, or something.' *Why race horses? It's enough trouble to sit on them.*

'A commemorative computer game?' Merlin and his young woman both looked blank and said nothing. She turned to him again. He was sure now she knew, somehow, that he was there.

'No, big, think big,' said the thin woman. 'Let's commission a statue, host a ball at a castle. *LMAO,* said Arthur's friend, and he realised he was speaking through her again. He was confused now, tired from all this thinking after 1500 years asleep. *ROFL,* she said, looking as if she knew what she meant.

Nobody else did though and they lapsed into silence for a while. Then one of the beards piped up, 'What about a slot/stall/talk at one of the summer literary festivals across the country?' *There are many literary festivals in the land of Logres,* said the young woman portentously, her voice deepening, with a Welsh resonance to it, *Eburacem, Luguvallium, Caerwent, Venta Belgarum … which is it you mean?*

'I don't know really, just a stall at Glastonbury 2009 possibly. If Michael Eavis keeps the biennial pattern of the Festival there'll be one then.' Someone else joined in. 'And this would fit. Did you know that in 1971, Jess Foster was caught in the background in Nicholas Roeg's famous film?'

*Hail to this glorious idea,* shouted the young woman Merlin, in a voice rich with the timbre of an experienced bard. She was on her feet now declaiming her enthusiasm, rousing the others. *Greetings should be sent to Duke Eavis forthwith … we could secure a pitch with force of will alone!*

The others were looking round uneasily now and slowly the young woman subsided. She sat back down, looked down at her hands, then reached across the table to Merlin. He felt the soft pressure of her fingers on his sleeve. More to the point she obviously felt the solidity of his arm where she could see nothing. The older beard carried on… 'What about a simple formal dinner with a high profile speaker?' *Dull, unless you can attract a true bard to grace it...*

'Or a short summer school for children on myth, legend and King Arthur – we have the teachers, the gamesters, the imagination?' 'I would do it if I had to.' The young woman replied as herself this time.

'Or a joint meeting with other Arthurian societies.' *There are NO other Arthurian Societies worth a sliver of linen from Sir Kay's underpants compared to Pendragon.* Merlin wondered where that one came from. Such vulgarity could not possibly be him. Was there another Invisible in the hall?

'A CD?' *There's nothing Seedy about Merlin, my boy. Think again.* The young woman looked at him. Not through him, but at him. She could definitely see something. 'A CD should be a definite along with the book,' she said frowning. 'I'm sure it could be organised and would be a great way to show the multi-media face of the society.' More gobbledygook, thought Merlin. Perhaps he should have a nap for a year or two and then come back to the fray completely refreshed.

A curly-haired man, silent until now spoke up. 'What about digging up Cadbury Castle again – or some attempt at some sort of archaeology?'

'Are you being sarky?' said the thin woman. 'No,' replied the curly-haired man. 'I would love to do an archaeological dig and if we have





managed to increase the membership we may get a lot of other people interested. It may be worth contacting some of the university societies and seeing if they have any digs planned for that year and whether we could come along as the workforce. So yes, it's a proper idea.'

'But can't we just go somewhere without digging? What about camping in France to explore the French romances? All telling stories and singing around the campfire in the evening. We could hold our own Pendragon festival.' The young woman herself suggested this and then immediately intoned, *Camping? Camping always plays havoc with my rheumatism, young woman. You youngsters have no idea…*

Then the first man Merlin had noticed looked at a gleaming torc on his wrist and said, 'Hey, look at the time.' Merlin considered 'looking at the time' for a moment but it baffled him. 'Last idea for now, and we've got to leave. What about an Arthurian competition run in the magazine to win something significant – like the commemorative book and CD? A quiz possibly but they have to get the answers in by a certain date and just in case they get all the answers right have to have a tie breaker where they complete a verse and the best one wins.'

'Daft', shouted young beard.

'Rubbish', yelled some others, as they all rose and made towards the door. Merlin tried to move again, but could not. He was not just creaky, but exhausted. The young woman lingered a little and held her arm out again, stroking his sleeve. 'Thanks,' she said. 'Can you have a think about what the best idea is for the Jubilee and let us know?' Merlin nodded gently, and knew she could just about see him doing so. 'Now go to sleep again, you're tired. I'll let you know what we choose to do. And will you join us for the celebration?' ☙

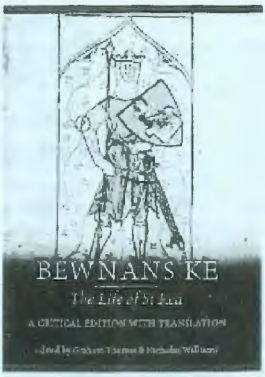
• *We'd welcome ideas about how best to commemorate Pendragon's 50th in 2009. If you have strong opinions about this do contact us by mid-November please, via the Enquiries address on page 3 or through* pendragon59.subs@btinternet.com

## *Pendragon Round Table 2007*

Pendragon's biennial get-together took place within the octave of St John's Eve (as Malory might have put it) on the last day of June at Baskerville Hall, near Hay-on-Wye. After the **AGM** at the round table in the conference room we had an enlightening update, based on his DPhil research at the University of Wales, on the latest scholarly ideas on the **Welsh Arthurian material** from Scott Lloyd. Scott, co-author of *Pendragon: the Origins of Arthur*, has kindly promised a synopsis of this valuable research for a future issue.

Round-the-table discussion centred on (among other areas) the journal, the new website and the Society's golden jubilee; the flavour of the lively contributions is evoked by Dave Burnham's preceding item (if you enjoyed this, you may also like C S Lewis' *That Hideous Strength*). As part of the afternoon's entertainment there was an **Arthurian Picture Quiz** (devised by that same court jester *extraordinaire* Dave Burnham) where wit, erudition and cheek were the requisite skills for success. Other very pleasant distractions included chances to win original art (due to the kind generosity of Ian Brown and Simon Rouse) and a selection of Arthurian reading matter.

Sadly local-based author Phil Rickman (who also writes as Thom Madley) was, due to an impending deadline, not able to be with us – his riveting novels touch on many matters both central and peripheral to Pendragonry – but we were joined again at Hay by Alex Gibbon, author of the provocative *The Mystery of Jack of Kent and the Fate of Owain Glyndŵr* (Sutton 2005). Though some of us, due to various emergencies, were unfortunately unable to stay the whole weekend (or even attend at all), the strong impression was given of enjoyable pastime in good company, thanks to some excellent organisation by Fred Stedman-Jones and Dave Burnham. With attractive surroundings, what more, apart from dry weather, could one ask for? ☙ *CL*

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