



Glastonbury, the Isle of Avalon

By Linda Baker

I approach the sacred hills of Glastonbury reflecting on the many overlapping and intertwining legends that originate from this alluring place. The heart of many mysteries, Glastonbury is one of the foremost destinations of the seeking heart. The more I begin to learn of the secrets of the region, the more entrancing its mysteries become.

Glastonbury's ancient name, *Ynis Witrin*, the Glassy Isle, may refer to a place of unsullied calm. In ages past, the hills of this area were small islands rising out of the marshes of an expansive inland sea. The water, while deep enough for boats to navigate, was nonetheless quite shallow and placid. Until these lowlands were drained to increase farmable land in the 1100s, the islands rose out of a misty marshland. Sailing in from far off, the remarkable appearance of the Glastonbury Tor would have been an unmistakable landmark.

The Celtic word 'Tor' means rocky hill. The strikingly steep, vulva shaped, hill rises impressively from the surrounding countryside. Crowned with the ruined relic of a medieval church tower, the Tor seems to have a psychic pull. Obvious immediately upon approach, the terraced sides of the Tor descend step-like. In prehistoric times, the Tor was terra-formed; shaped or sculpted by human engineering. This unusual contour is thought to be the ruined path of a very large, worn, ritual labyrinth, the path of which would have taken about 7 hours to transverse. It can still be walked today with difficulty.

Glastonbury's connection to Avalon, the mystical isle of Arthurian legend, begins with the belief that shamanic tribes flourished here in prehistoric times. The later arriving Celts expanded their ritualistic principles, carrying on the school of mysteries. Through the ages, with the exception of an upheaval or two, the sanctity of Glastonbury was upheld and refreshed. Each generational wave renewing the gentle call, finding in the land itself a distinctive, magnetic charm.

In Arthurian legend, the mortally wounded King Arthur is brought across the waters by the 3 faerie queens to the Isle of Avalon, isle of apples. (Avalon literally means Apple-land.) Apples held mystical meaning as the symbolic fruit of soul transformation, death and

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regeneration, and immortality. Archaeological evidence from the Dark Age period of Arthur has been uncovered in the vicinity. Evidence indicating the existence of fortifications and metal working, dating from 500 AD, has been found both on the Tor and also at Cadbury Castle, 11 miles to the southeast of Glastonbury, a possible site of Camelot.

The monks of Glastonbury Abbey are said to have discovered the long buried remains of Arthur and Guinevere. In the latter part of the 1100s, while restoring the abbey, monks brought up a log coffin, which was buried some 16 feet deep. Above the coffin they discovered a leaden cross with the Latin inscription, "Here lies buried King Arthur, in the Isle of Avalon". In the coffin were the bones of a large man and a woman with yellow hair. These golden tresses of Guinevere turned to dust as they were touched. The remains were reinterred within the Abbey in an elevated black marble tomb.

There is a question about the veracity of the claim. The Abbey, having experienced a great fire a few years earlier, which destroyed many important relics, was suspiciously fortunate to find such another. Yet, recent archaeological evidence does corroborate the existence of the log burial, and its 6th century timeframe. Interestingly, visitors to the ruins have occasionally heard the chanting of monks from bygone eras.

As the pinnacle of the Isle of Avalon, the Tor is said to hold the secret to the entrance of the Underworld. The ancient rites carried out here must have been elaborate. Ascending the Tor on a modern day path that shortcuts the way to the top, I look down on the labyrinthine paths folding back upon themselves as they wind along their way. In my mind's eye, I easily conjure hundreds of labyrinth walkers curling their way up the Tor to celebrate Beltane at the Spring Equinox.

On top of the Tor are the ruined remains of the church of St. Michael. In 1275 an earthquake leveled a previous church built here, and in 1360 the tower that now stands was erected. Dedicated to St. Michael, the slayer of dragons and the guardian of high places, this ruin occupies the ground of a succession of earlier holy sites. The Celtic sun god Bel, whose fires burnt on hilltops in many lands, was supplanted in Christian times by the worship of St. Michael. Before this gradual appropriation, Druidic priests would have rekindled Bel's fire at the holiday of Beltane. From the sanctified flames, the waiting hearthstones of the surrounding area would then receive ritually relighting.

The Goddess, in her forms of maiden, mother, and crone, was the central to the spirituality of pagan life. All but lost today, She is found here in Glastonbury depicted on the side of the tower, in a weathered carving of St. Brigit milking a cow. There are two Brigits affiliated with Glastonbury, the prehistoric triple goddess of the Celts, Bride, the



goddess of the flame and hearth, and the historical, 5th century St. Brigit of Ireland. These two personas became blended together, imbuing Glastonbury with their power. The later Brigit dwelt in the islands for a time, living in the chapel she dedicated to Mary Magdalene. Nothing of this chapel remains, however the former tiny islet on which it stood is still called Bride's Mound.

That the early Christian Church found a foothold here that evolved into the Glastonbury Abbey is without doubt. An allegorical tale told is that of Jesus' uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, coming to Glastonbury in 36 AD and establishing the first church. When Joseph arrived exhausted by the journey he landed at what is known as Wearyall Hill, then an island. He struck his staff upon the ground and it immediately took root and blossomed into a thorn tree. The ancient thorn trees do exist; they are, in fact, a variety of thorn found in Palestine. Joseph is said to have brought with him two cruets of the blood and water from the wounds of Christ, these became transmuted into the Holy Grail. There are two springs at Glastonbury, the red and the white, already heavy with Celtic symbolism by the early Christian era; they became intertwined with the Grail legend. It is thought by many believers that the Holy Grail itself is entombed beneath the red spring of the Chalice Well.

The pagan mystics who lived here saw much of their sacred symbology and beliefs incorporated into the religion of the newcomers. As Nicholas Mann, author of *The Isle of Avalon, Sacred Mysteries of Arthur and the Glastonbury Tor*, writes, "Although the legends of Joseph were developed by the Glastonbury Brothers in order to increase the reputation of the Abbey, they retain a mythic link to the far older pagan tradition embedded in the trees, springs, and landscape of the Isle of Avalon. From the Christian tradition it is therefore possible to read the ancient story of the island."

The iron rich waters of the Chalice Well are not red, but do leave behind a rusty iron residue. Now set in a meditative garden, the water flows through a series of pools and gardens, which are inhabited by a loving, welcoming presence. This place is my favorite little oasis and mustn't be missed by anyone traveling to Glastonbury. Alice Buckton, who owned the Well from 1912 to her death in 1944, conceptualized the idea of the Chalice Well Trust, which makes access for everyone available today. Her spirit surely greets visitors to the Gardens. In Buckton's circle of friends was the architect, Frederick Bligh Bond, who, among many things, designed the Trust's insignia, the Vesica Piscis. The intertwining circles of that symbol represent the sacred duality; the known & the unknown; or the material world and the spirit realm, and the overlap between those worlds. The Vesica Piscis is represented throughout the garden and incorporated into the design on the Well's cover.



Chalice Well water is viewed as having healing properties and many people come to drink or bathe in the waters. Water may be taken home; containers may be brought or purchased at the Garden entrance.

Alice Buckton and Fredrick Bligh Bond were Spiritualists. In the early part of the 1900s many people were drawn to exploring spiritual contact. In 1908, Bligh Bond was asked to take on the duties of excavating the ruined remains of Glastonbury Abbey. Throughout the dig, unbeknownst to the Church authorities, he used spirit contact by way of automatic writing to assist with difficult aspects of the project. Although important and tangible results were achieved, Bligh Bond was publicly shamed after he naively revealed his technique in his 1918 book concerning the Abbey excavations, *The Gates of Remembrance*. He was stripped of his position, sadly branded as a fraud and a nut case.

The greatest misfortune surrounding Glastonbury occurred in 1534. Henry VIII broke with Rome's authority. Soon many cloistered communities were ordered to swear allegiance to the king and turn over their valuables to the Crown. Confusion reigned. Very quickly most of Britain's abbeys were destroyed and dishonored by agents of the king. Formally termed the Dissolution of the Monasteries, relics were smashed, treasures looted, and the monks put to death or dispersed. At Glastonbury, the black marble tomb of Arthur and Guinevere was stolen. The invaluable Abbey library of ancient and venerable writings was burned, its papers thrown to the winds. The abbot and a number of the clergy were cruelly hung.

In the aftermath of this havoc, the buildings were dismantled; the stonework sold off, so that the Abbey ruin seen today, is that of centuries of looting. A few recovered treasures, successfully hidden during the Dissolution, can now be seen in the Abbey's small, but well done museum.

Hidden treasure is part of Glastonbury's lore. The entrance to the Underworld is said to be hidden on Glastonbury Tor. One monk of old, St. Collen, had a vision of this place and recorded his experience. Puttering around his hermitage at the foot of the Tor one day, he unexpectedly encountered the King of Faery, Gwynn ap Nudd (pronounced Neeth). The king invited the saint to a faerie feast. The saint accepted, but surreptitiously took along some holy water. Following the king, he entered a chamber of rare treasures, dazzling jewels, and reveling faeries. When he was invited to eat, he became a rather bad-mannered guest, throwing holy water around. Naturally everything dissolved, and he found himself standing in the spot he started from, alone.



The name, *Gwynn ap Nudd*, is Celtic for 'White Child of the Night'. And while this name's significance is shrouded in an immutable mystery, it may refer to the Moon, which may have been the place of departed souls. Dying and being reborn each month, the Moon held symbolism for the journey of the soul. The whiteness of the Moon may have held an association to the chalky-white landscape, or been linked to the honored bones of the ancestors. Archaeological findings are now utilizing complex computer programs to bring to light lost knowledge of astral alignments. The Moon may have set on the Tor from an undiscovered sacred place, on a holy night, as yet unknown. The Tor's secret entrance to the Underworld seemingly admitting the Child of the Night as the Moon set behind the mystical hill. While the name of *Gwynn ap Nudd* is Celtic in origin, this correlation undoubtedly predates Celtic times.

Little of the beliefs of the ancients can be proven. However, I find that the true beauty of the Mystery is not found in a constraint of rationalism, but in the appreciation of wonder.

May we all have opportunities to examine the Mystery, finding that with which we resonate. Glastonbury calls out as a powerful and intriguing place, inviting us to delve.