

DOWSING THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND

TALK BY DON BRYAN, 17 JAN 2013

On the (very cold) evening of 17th January, Don Bryan gave a fascinating talk entitled, “Dowsing the Arthurian Legend”. Don has been intrigued by the legends of King Arthur since childhood and is a lifetime member of the Pendragon Society.

Arthur is supposed to have lived in the late fifth/early sixth centuries (the early “Dark Ages”) and to have led resistance to the Anglo-Saxon hords invading our shores in the post-Roman period. Unfortunately, this is a time where written records are almost entirely lacking. The first known mention of Arthur is by Nennius, a Welsh monk, in about 830 AD. Arthur does not appear in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle, although this does not mean he did not exist (Saint Swithun, a ninth-century Bishop of Winchester also fails to get a mention). However, most of the legends associated with Arthur (the Knights of the Round Table, Guinevere, Merlin, Camelot, the Holy Grail etc.) are much later and are clearly medieval “enhancements”. Nevertheless, Don believes there is credence to the basic story and has been fortunate enough to have dug and dowsed at some of the sites most associated with Arthur.

Legend associates Tintagel in Cornwall as Arthur’s birthplace, although the existing castle dates from the 13th century and is much later than Arthur’s time. However, archaeology has revealed between 50 and 60 fifth-century dwellings on the site as well as some contemporary pottery (“Tintagel B” type – Mediterranean in origin) and a single stone engraved “Artognou” - could this be Arthur? Through dowsing, Don believes that the site contains a Dark Age church, a “great hall” and more structures contemporary with the time of Arthur.

South Cadbury Castle, an Iron Age hill fort in Somerset, has long been associated with Camelot – Arthur’s alleged castle and court. Don was involved in excavations at South Cadbury over a five year period in the 1960s when Dark Age ramparts, the footprint of a large timber hall and more Tintagel B pottery were located. Don believes that the site also contains a church dating from about AD 460 which has not been excavated. Local people still talk of ancient battles at South Cadbury and legend says that when the castle fell, the fleeing Britons were captured and beheaded. Much later, a plane crash revealed the burial of 27 decapitated skeletons, adding support to the story.

Another legend regards Arthur being killed (or mortally wounded) in the Battle of Camlann and taken to Glastonbury for burial. The discovery of his burial at Glastonbury Abbey is likely to have been no more than a propaganda exercise to raise funds for the rebuilding the abbey after a fire in 1191. However, the nearby Glastonbury Tor has been partially dug and evidence of Dark Age structures, graves, a church has been found and yet more Tintagel B pottery.

Don concluded by stating that we can say with certainty that in the alleged time of Arthur there was a Christian king somewhere in the West Country, who fought at Cadbury and may have been buried at Glastonbury. For everything else, the jury is still out!