

King Arthur's Britain and the Landmarks Associated with it

There are items, structures and places that bring a sense of magic when around them. This is King Arthur's Britain – the parts of England, Scotland, and Wales that are associated with the legends surrounding King Arthur, the knights of the Round Table, and other Arthurian legend characters and knights.

If you're a great lover of Arthurian Legend and myth, then a trip around Arthur's Britain is for you. But for those that cannot make the journey, I've put together a journey through this website, so you can see the sites and get a feel for the parts of Britain that are associated with King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

Bamburgh Castle in Northumberland, England

Bamburgh Castle hovers over the sandy coastline of Northumberland. With its massive walls and dramatic views, Bamburgh Castle is host to thousands of visitors a year who come to see one of two possible places that could have been Sir Lancelot's *Joyous Garde* Castle. Originally, the site hosted a Dark Ages stronghold, which may explain the legend of Bamburgh's connection to Lancelot.

This is the probable site of Sir Lancelot's famous castle of Joyous Garde, where he once gave refuge to Tristan and Iseult, and where he himself retired to escape the rumours of his liaison with Arthur's Queen.

In 547 Bamburgh Castle became the Northumbrian capital of the "Angles" who had settled there earlier that century. With the transition to the capital, Bamburgh became a stronghold of the Saxon alliance who were King Arthur's prime enemies in an attempt to maintain British rule. At the time, the name Bamburgh wasn't used, but rather the area was called *Din Guayrdis*, which may have influenced Sir Thomas Mallory's account of Sir Lancelot's castle, who was the first to refer to Bamburgh as *Joyous Garde* and attribute it to Lancelot in his work *Le Morte d'Arthur*.



Chalice Well Gardens in Glastonbury, England

Chalice Hill is the third and gentlest of the three hills which form the heart of Glastonbury's sacred landscape. It has long been considered the most sacred of the hills, and it is believed by many to have been the final resting place of the Grail. A spring, rich in iron which turns the water red, rises here, and a peaceful garden has grown up around it in the past decade.

The reddish tinge to the water resulted in its once being called the Blood Spring; in modern times, it has been mystically associated with the blood of Christ caught in the Grail.

Within the garden there are a number of sheltered spots in which the visitor may stop and meditate or dream of the Grail and Arthur. The well-head is covered with an elaborate lid with a fine wrought-iron sculpture of the Vesica Pisces, a sign interpreted as representing the overlapping of the inner and outer worlds. blood of Christ caught in the Grail.



St. Michael's Mount in Cornwall, England

Believed to mark the site of a great battle between Arthur and a local giant, this dramatic building rises above the sands of Mount's Bay, where tradition had it that at low tide a person can walk out to the island. Joseph of Arimethea used to come to ply his trade as a tin merchant.

Joseph is later believed to have brought the sacred relic of the Holy Grail to Britain, and to have built the first church at Glastonbury, in Somerset. A firmly entrenched tradition says that he brought his young nephew, Jesus, with him on one of his many trips to Britain. Since biblical testimony is silent about the life of Jesus before His ministry, there could be some truth in this.

The Mount of St. Michael is associated with King Mark, Tristan, and Queen Iseult – all characters of Arthurian legend.

According to local legend, the hermit Ogrin, who lived at nearby Roche Rock brought about a brief reconciliation between the estranged King Mark and his would-be Queen Iseult, who had been living in the wilds with Tristan. Because the Queen had only rags to wear, Ogrin bought fresh clothing and a horse for her at a fair on the Mount of St. Michael.



The Round Table in Winchester, England

Accounts differ about the origin of the Round Table, at which Arthur's knights met to tell of their deeds and from which they invariably set forth in search of further adventures. The Norman chronicler Wace was the first to mention it, in his *Roman de Brut* of 1155. There, he simply says that Arthur devised the idea of a round table to prevent quarrels between his barons over the question of precedence.

Another writer, Layamon, adapted Wace's account and added to it, describing a quarrel between Arthur's lords which was settled by a Cornish carpenter who, on hearing of the problem, created a portable table which could seat 1600 men.

The design displayed on the Winchester Round Table dates from 1552 and was made to impress the visiting Emperor Charles V.

Both Wace and Layamon refer to Breton story-tellers as their source for this and there is little reason to doubt them. This being the case, the origins of the table may well date back to Celtic times, and even be traceable to the age of Arthur himself. In the later medieval stories, however, it is Merlin who is responsible for the creation of the table. Malory, taking up the theme and developing it, made it the centre-piece of his epic re-telling.

The large wooden table in the Great Hall at Winchester dates from no earlier than the thirteenth century, when it may have been made at the command of King Edward III, who was considering a revival of the Round Table as an order of chivalry. In the end, he dropped the idea and created the Order of Garter instead, but the table remains. Made of oak, it is 18 feet across and nearly 3 inches thick. It weighs nearly 1.25 tons.



Tintagel Castle in Cornwall, England

Perhaps the most familiar of all the sites associated with Arthur. Local tradition, founded largely on the writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth in his twelfth-century History of the Kings of Britain, claims this is the birthplace of Arthur, from where Merlin took him to be fostered in secret.

The dramatic ruins of the castle, dating from the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, are too late to have anything to do with the real Arthur. None the less, they are responsible for a good deal of romantic inspiration.

The anonymous medieval writer of The Folie Tristan said that the castle was built by giants and that it used to vanish twice a year – at midwinter and again at midsummer.

Thomas Hardy visited and later drew the castle from memory, reinstating its medieval might. Sir Arnold Bax (1883-1953) composed a wonderful tone-poem evoking the majesty and mystery of the place in 1917; to listen to it is to hear the waves crashing against the rocks below the castle.

A much earlier monastic site on the island promontory behind the castle dates from a time more or less contemporary with Arthur. More recent discoveries, following excavations in 1994, indicate that it may have been a Celtic site of some importance. The most recent thinking suggests that there may well be something in the legends surrounding the place.



The Tristan Stone in Cornwall, England

Beside the road leading to Fowey in Cornwall stands an ancient, weathered stone measuring some 7 feet in height and set in a concrete base. It was once much closer to Castle Dore and may have been the origin of the association of this site with the story of the tragic love of Tristan and Iseult.

There is a Latin inscription on the stone, now much worn, which can be restored with only a little judicial guesswork to read:

Drustans hic iacet Cunomori filius, which means: *Drustanus lies here, the son of Cunomorus. A memorial to the hero Tristan stands beside the road near the Cornish town of Fowey. It has been suggested, plausibly, that the characters referred to are Tristan, the nephew of Mark – Drustan being a recognized variant of the hero's name and Cunomorus being a Latinization of Cynvawr. Cynvawr, in turn, is said by the ninth-century author Nennius, who compiled the best historical account of Arthur, to be identified with King Mark.*



The Legend of Merlin's Cave

Tennyson made this place famous in his *Idylls of the King* when he described waves bringing the infant Arthur to the shore, where he was plucked out by Merlin and carried to safety. Local legend has long associated this cave – which fills with water at every high tide – with the great enchanter.

The rocks of Tintagel cliffs loom out over the entrance to Merlin's Cave, making it a dark and gloomy place.

It is certainly a place of considerable atmosphere, where one might indeed expect to see Merlin approaching, with his staff held up to illuminate the darkness of the cave. It is now mostly the haunt of scuba-divers in search of shells and fossils.



The Cup of Christ from the Last Supper

The Holy Grail is generally considered to be the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper and the one used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch his blood as he hung on the cross. This significance, however, was introduced into the Arthurian legends by Robert de Boron in his verse romance *Joseph d'Arimathe*, which was probably written in the last decade of the twelfth century or the first couple of years of the thirteenth.

In earlier sources and in some later ones, the grail is something very different. The term "grail" comes from the Latin *gradale*, which meant a dish brought to the table during various stages (Latin "gradus") or courses of a meal. In Chrétien and other early writers, such a plate is intended by the term "grail." Chrétien, for example, speaks of "un graal," a grail or platter and thus not a unique item.



Excalibur, the magical sword of King Arthur

Excalibur was the sword given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake. Some sources suggest that Arthur gave it to Gawain. After Arthur's last battle he made Bedivere return it to the water where it was grasped by a hand and drawn under. Its scabbard prevented the wearer from losing blood. When Gawain fought the magician Mabon over the fairy Marsique, she obtained the scabbard for him but it subsequently disappeared.

The Welsh name for Excalibur was Caladwlch, equating linguistically with Irish Caladbolg, the name of a sword borne by heroes in Irish legend, derived from *calad* (hard) and *bolg*(lightning).

