

Did those feet walk on Devon's pastures green?

In the first of three articles Mark Herbert synthesises findings from recent independent studies, each contending a previously undeclared Joseph of Arimathea tradition in the former Dumnonian, tin-mining county of Devon.

Beneath the Great White Palace

Concealed along the south-west coast of Devon's South Hams promontory, remote and off the inland beaten track, is the secluded, tidal mound of Burgh Island. Being tidal, the isle has a twice daily constraint of access. At ebbing tide, one can trek across the shore from the mainland resort, Bigbury-on-Sea; when the tide floods, however, a sea tractor (a bus on stilts) conveniently ferries to and fro. Apart from Drake's Island (in Plymouth Sound) and the Great Mew Stone (off Wembury Point at the River Yealm's inlet), Devon's south coast has no other habitable isle; Burgh, with its unique tidal singularity, stands unrivalled in the shire.

Situated at the mouth of the lesser known River Avon, the island is supremely placed to receive inland cargo conveyed from Dartmoor's heights. The Avon's head, 13.8 nautical miles (nmi) due north of Burgh, is sited beside the old tin workings near Ryder's Hill (1,690 feet above sea level). Once spelt 'Aven' or 'Aune', the river outlets into the sea at the headland-protected haven of Bantham.

With the island so naturally cut off and access to international waters via the English Channel, it offers scope for the couriering and stowing of all sorts of closteted merchandise. Indeed, a few centuries ago, Burgh was renowned as a bootlegger's paradise. This half-tide skerry became the hideout for stealthy imports and those needing to escape the local excisemen. Frequent island visitor and famed novelist, Dame Agatha Christie (1890-1976), exploited the setting's bygone notoriety in her 1941 thriller with its biblically inspired title (*Eccles. 6:1*).¹ Therein, Burgh became Smuggler's Island.

It also gained repute as an islet fishery after the Dissolution of the Monasteries, specialising in pilchards. Still standing atop the grassy summit, lie the ruins of a huer's shelter from which the outcry of shoal watchers echoed across the bay. Today, the island is best recognised for

its grand and exclusive 1929-built art deco hotel, once described as the finest lodgings west of London's Ritz. The venue played host to eminent guests such as Edward VIII, Wallis Simpson, Winston Churchill and Noel Coward. But what of the island's distant past some 2,000 years ago?

In 2001 this private island came up for sale. It was the day after Michaelmas when seller and buyer gathered to convey the isle's title deed of ownership. Outgoing vendors, the Porters, had just handed over the key to new proprietors, the Orchards. With the cavernous Mermaid rock pool providing the backdrop, both parties raised their glasses to toast a smooth exchange. Then something extraordinary happened. A vivid flash of lightning struck the water; a single thunderclap crashed overhead. Seconds later stair-rods of rain, as never seen in 16 resident years, poured down, swamping outside to a 3-inch depth in as many minutes. Then, as if turning off a tap, the deluge ended as abruptly as it began. Everyone was stunned. Ex-owner, Tony Porter, recalls that surreal instant; 'Call it cosmic, divine or supernatural, it was uncanny that such a display had been sent at that very moment.'²

Melkinus' prophecy

The spectacle witnessed over this sacred spot has a remarkable parallel with the spiritual 'cloudburst' foretold in the closing lines of a 6th century tract. Its intent was, unmistakably, provision of exact grave-finding clues (using metrology) to locate the worthy isle on which Joseph of Arimathea eternally rests; 'When His tomb is found, it will be seen whole, untouched and open to the entire world. From then on, those who dwell in that noble island shall lack neither water nor dew of heaven. Long before the Day of Judgment in Josaphat; open shall these things be and told to the living.'³

Those words were purportedly scribed 1,461 years earlier (one Sothic 'Sirius' cycle⁴) by the alleged Welsh bard,

Melkinus ('qui fuit ante Merlinum', who was before Merlin, flourishing c.540). They represent the lone, tangible link that Joseph was buried on Britain's misty isles. They have endured only because of their replication by John of Glastonbury (flourishing c.1340) in his *Chronicles or Antiquities of the Glastonbury Church*. Miraculously, John's source manuscript survived the Abbey's inferno of 1184, as did several other works by Melkinus, found at the Dissolution (c.1536 but no longer extant) by Henry VIII's antiquary, John Leland (1503-52).

He held license to search and suppress ancient records at ecclesiastical sites including Glastonbury Abbey; the havoc is said to have caused him 'infinite distress'.⁵ Leland read John's replica and dared to challenge public opinion which he understood to have been formed by Melkinus' declaration one millennia earlier, that Joseph was interred at the Abbey. Leland responded: 'For I cannot easily believe that Joseph, a disciple of Christ, best and greatest, was buried at Glastonbury.'⁶ Evidently, two thousand years since Joseph, His enshrined remains have never been found in Somerset's former lake village. Thus, if Melkinus' prophecy is still to be realised, then it will almost certainly be elsewhere amongst south-west England's rich, Arimathean lore.

Whilst Leland's instinct has so far been proved correct, crucially, he never appreciated that Melkinus' original text could not have ascribed Glastonbury in the term that John's facsimile proclaimed. How could it when John's copied prose attributes 'Insula avallonis', Isle of Avallon, an appellation not apparent until 600 years after Melkinus' death?

There are only two rational explanations to resolve this chronological paradox. Either Melkinus (and his tract) is a concocted, 12thc. fraud, which is unlikely given that Leland recounts seeing two other works by Melkinus (*viz. Historiae fragmentum* - 'A Piece of History', and *Historiolam de rebus Britannicis* - 'A Story about the British'),⁷ or else it is a genuine, 6thc.