



Thin Places, Sacred Spaces, Historical Traces

St Helen's Tour of Mystic Britain A Visitors' Guide

Chapter 2 – Bath, South Wales, Glastonbury; June 2023

From Salisbury and Stonehenge, we head west to a setting not created by mankind to honour the sacred, but by the Creator to honour mankind with healing - Bath. John Leech will tell us about this amazing place where more than a million litres of scalding hot water bubble up from the depths of the earth each day. While in this corner of Britain, we'll visit a pre-Norman Saxon church in Bradford on Avon, and then on to Glastonbury. Helen Giroux has done the work for us on these two.

Bath in Somerset. In the valley of the River Avon, 156 km west of London, we find the city of Bath. 'Lonely Planet' says: "Britain is littered with beautiful cities, but precious few compare to Bath." Declared a World Heritage Site in 1987, site of the only hot springs in the UK, inspiring legends, religious monuments and tales of healing: Bath can legitimately claim to belong to the mystic world we are exploring.

Evidence of Stone Age hunters has been found, and apparently the legendary Prince Bladud cured both his pigs (a temporary employment between more regal jobs) and his leprosy... The Romans followed this up with a sacred bathing complex, a 300 year construction project starting around 67AD, named *Aquae Sulis*, borrowing the name of the Briton goddess Sulis whom they associated with Minerva. Legend also says that Bath may have been the site Battle of Badon, where King Arthur is said to have defeated the Anglo-Saxons. Mystic indeed! After the Romans moved on, leaving the place to fall into ruins, the apparently magical qualities of the hot springs attracted pilgrims and it soon became a religious centre. Bath Abbey was founded in the 7th century and rebuilt many times over the years. A low point came when Henry VIII ordered the abandonment of its monastic role; the current structure dates from 1617, making it the last great medieval church raised in England. The story of this Abbey/Cathedral is a veritable history of the development of the church and its relationship with government in the UK. More mysticism!

Starting in the Stuart and Georgian times, the city has been re-developed into an architectural marvel. In addition to the imposing abbey church, the epic Royal Crescent, the Circus, theatres and of course



Roman Baths and Abbey Church; by Harry Moore; used with permission

the restored baths are testaments to human artistry and the veneration of this site. And stories about the hot springs have continued to amplify a mystical aura: Queen Mary, wife of James II, cured her infertility in the Cross Bath. From time to time famous people moved here: William Pitt; authors Jane Austen and Mary Shelly; Charles Dickens was a frequent visitor; Emperor Haile Selassie from Ethiopia during WWII. Bath's cultural treasures even merited specific targeting by the Luftwaffe in the so-called "Baedeker Blitz" in 1942, when more than 400 people were killed and more than 19,000 buildings damaged or destroyed.



Bath: The Royal Crescent. Photo by Harry Wood, used with permission

In modern times, tourism has become a very big deal: the buildings, the baths, a seriously excellent rugby team: it truly is a gorgeous place to visit. And bubbling forth as the symbol of Bath's mystical history, the hot springs that gave

the city its name continue to enchant. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bath,_Somerset
<http://visitbath.co.uk/>, <http://www.cityofbath.co.uk/>

Saxon Church, Bradford on Avon. Leaving Bath, we walk 12 km to Bradford on Avon, a quiet town noted for its Tithe Barn and the Bridge Teashop, both said to be the best in Britain. Bypassing these, we soon reach one of the oldest churches in England, St Laurence, thought to have been built in the 8th century. However from the late Middle Ages until 1871 it was not used as a church but as a house, warehouse or as a school, and was lost in the surrounding buildings. In 1850, the local vicar noticed the high roofline and carvings and, looking into the history, realized that this had once been an Anglo Saxon church abandoned when the new parish church was built in Norman times. It has since been restored and is remarkable as one of the few surviving unaltered Anglo Saxon churches. The building, originally built without windows, is so tall in relation to its area that the narrow doors look almost comical. Two angels are carved on each side of the arch to the small chancel; they are thought to date from 950 AD.



St Laurence Church (www.greatenglishchurches.co.uk)

Glastonbury, 43 km south west of Bath and now known as the site of one of the world's largest annual music festivals, has long been the destination of pilgrims. Legend has it that Joseph of Arimathea travelling and trading in metals first visited in the first century along with a young carpenter's apprentice. It is from this story that William Blake wrote the words to his poem Jerusalem:

*and did those feet in ancient times
 once tread England's mountain green?
 And was the Holy Lamb of God
 On England's pleasant pastures seen?*

Joseph is said to have returned again after the crucifixion, bringing the new Christian faith and to have buried a chalice on the site of the Abbey. A thorn bush sprang up on the spot where he planted his staff. It was the search for this Chalice that spawned the Arthurian legends and monks in the 12th century claimed to have dug up a coffin containing King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. Archaeological evidence shows a Celtic monastery dating from the 7th century, St Dunstan enlarged the Abbey in the 10th century joining the Benedictines. The Domesday book records the Abbey as the largest and most prosperous in England but a fire in 1184 destroyed the buildings. It was during the rebuilding that Arthur's coffin was found by



Glastonbury Abby ruins (www.users.ox.ac.uk)

the astute Abbot who used the publicity to attract pilgrims. Glastonbury Abbey prospered until Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries, and has spent the last 400 years in ruins. The legends however still live on and the thorn bush still blooms each Christmastime. In 1910 G K Chesterton wrote. " In Glastonbury, as in all noble and humane things, the myth is more important than the history".

These visits give us cause and opportunity to look at several divergent sources of spiritual heritage and influences on the development of Christianity and the church in Britain. The Romans arrived not long after Jesus' life, and were as hostile to the new Christian movement there as they were back home. At least three Christian saints (St Alban, St Julius, St Aaron) were martyred by the Romans during this time of persecution. When the Emperor Constantine encouraged Christianity throughout the empire from 313 AD onward, it was slower to take hold in Britain and pagan beliefs still abounded, keeping it a minority faith. With the gradual loss of Roman rule and influence near the end of the 4th Century and the arrival of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes with their pagan beliefs, Christianity survived mainly on the western edges of Britain. Not until Augustine visited in 597, well after Britain ceased to be a Roman province, did the Pope in Rome establish an alliance between Christianity and Kingship in Britain and a Roman version of the church take hold.

The legend that Joseph of Arimathea visited may be nothing more than a legend, but it is indicative of the multiplicity of sources of Christian conversion in Britain during and after the Roman rule. Rome never succeeded in occupying all of England, much less Britain. Celts were able to hang on in Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Cornwall and the Isle of Man, and some of the British Celts became Christians from the fourth century onwards. Their conversion originated from travellers from the Mediterranean via North Africa. The Celtic Church developed in isolation from the Roman one in England and unsurprisingly had its own peculiarities of both religious practice and architecture. (http://www.greatenglishchurches.co.uk/html/the_pre-norman_church.html)

We'll hear more about the Celts and their mysticism and adoption of Christianity as we continue our discovery of Mystic Britain. And there's a lot more to visit and hear about too!

Your Mystic Britain travel guides