



Thin Places, Sacred Spaces, Historical Traces

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

Chapter 9 – Devon and Cornwall: August 2023

Having traveled westward along the south of England, we arrive in Cornwall, a land with Celtic background that resisted the Romans and Saxons for centuries. The area also did not join with most of England after the Synod of Whitby (remember 664 AD?), remaining Celtic and monastic rather than parochial and Roman. It's not surprising that mysticism abounds here; many saints have lent their names to places and stories residing in Cornwall. Helen will introduce us to St Michaels' Mount – it will look familiar to those who have seen Mont St Michel on the French coast. Since we are “walking” around Britain, it's appropriate to do one of the better-known walks, the Saint's Way; Helen will guide us along this famous hike. Finally, Val will tell us about the place associated with the most famous of British legends, King Arthur when we get to Tintagel Castle, a place of mystical otherworldliness. So let's go!

Like Lindisfarne in Northumberland St Michael's Mount is a small island accessible by foot at low tide. It was the centre of the tin trade in pre Roman times, and in 495 AD a vision of St Michael the Archangel led to the establishment of a church on this small rocky island. A few centuries later, a Celtic monastery occupied the site and in the 11th century the Normans, struck by the similarity to Mont St Michel in France, asked the Benedictines to build an Abbey there. In 1262 and 1263 there were four miracles on the island which led to an increase in pilgrimages to the Abbey. Over the years it grew apart from its French cousin and was granted to Syon Abbey in 1425. After Dissolution, the Abbey was fortified and the first beacon to warn of the approaching

Spanish Armada was lit here. It was used as an armoury by the Royalists in the Civil War; after the war it was purchased by the St Aubyn family who still live in the castle, now open to the public.

St Michael's Mount sits on a major ley line. Ley lines are hypothetical straight lines between ancient sites that are believed to carry special energy and power. The St Michael line runs northeast from the island and passes through Glastonbury Tor, Avebury and Bury St Edmunds. We have already visited two of



St Michael's Mount (photo: tiggerrenewing.wordpress.com)



The Saint's Way (photo:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saints%27_Way

these places and learned about their spiritual significance. Bury St Edmunds is a market town in Suffolk with a cathedral and abbey. stmichaelsmount.co.uk

Traces of early saints abound as you walk across the breadth of Cornwall along The Saints Way, a trail from Padstow on the north coast of Cornwall to Fowey on the south. Following the probable route of early Christian travellers making their way from Ireland to the Continent, it avoided the difficult passage around Land's End, trading it for a long day of walking.



A signpost on the Saint's Way (photo: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saints%27_Way)

On the River Camel at Little Petherick, a 14th century church is dedicated to St Petroc with both Welsh and Irish connections. Nearby is a chapel dedicated to St Issey, daughter of Welsh King Brychan who accompanied Petroc to Padstow in the 4th century; both places reportedly still feel serene and spiritual. Next we cross St Breock Downs into a wilder landscape of pre historical burial mounds and more modern wind turbines.

The trail then passes through woodlands passing chapels, holy wells and Celtic crosses dating from the days when this was one of the well-trod pilgrimage routes.

At the end of the walk, Fowey is one of Cornwall's most popular tourist destinations. In the backstreets of this picturesque little town we find the Church of

St Finnbarrus, a 7th century Bishop of Cork who passed through on his way to Rome stopping long enough to build a church here. These early saints were indeed a peripatetic lot. They must have felt impelled to spread the Gospel to these remote parts of the Kingdom or perhaps what is remote today may have been thriving communities in that world of tin mining, fishing and farming. *Sacred Britain by Martin Symington Edition 1 Bradt Travel Guides, UK*



Tintagel Castle (Photo credit, pinlovely.com)

Tintagel

Castle was a prosperous and highly significant site for about 150–200 years, from about AD 450 until AD 650. Its precise function is not known Although for 40yrs after excavations in the 1930's



Tintagel Castle (Photo credit, infozauk.com)

it was thought to be a Dark Age Celtic monastery, it was more probably a stronghold and trading station of the Dark Age rulers of Dumnonia (Devon and Cornwall). Cornish tin may have been traded for many of the Mediterranean goods which were used and consumed on the site. The site's precipitous headland (the island), connected to the mainland only by a narrow neck of land, makes it

would well explain the discovery of quantities of high quality pottery, tableware and Mediterranean glass.

The site of Tintagel Castle has been inhabited at least since the late Roman period, and a community flourished here in the 5th to 7th centuries after which there is little evidence of activity for over 500 years. In about 1138 Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* popularized the figure of King Arthur, the legendary ruler of Britain, Ireland and large parts of continental Europe. The *History* contains the earliest written mention of Tintagel in the tale of how Arthur was conceived there by Uther Pendragon, King of Britain, who with magical assistance seduced Queen Igrerna (Igraine), wife of Duke Gorlois of Cornwall. Why Geoffrey used Tintagel can only be guessed. He associated Arthur closely with Cornwall, loved Cornish legends and described Tintagel's dramatic physical attributes, evidently appreciating its romantic nature. The visible remains on the headland have helped to keep a memory of its former importance.



Curtain wall, Tintagel Castle (Photo credit, tripadvisor.co.uk)

Although the castle was little used, imaginative legends continued to flourish. In the 1480's the antiquary William Worcester gave Tintagel as the place of Arthur's birth as well as his conception; and in 1650 the name King Arthur's Castle is first found. References to King Arthur and to the castle had become a mixture of local folklore and literary legends. In medieval literature, Caerleon and then the legendary Camelot replaced Tintagel in the role of King Arthur's castle. During Victorian times, there was a fascination with the Arthurian legends and the ruins of the castle became a tourist destination.

(Credits, Oliver Padel/English Heritage.org.uk)

We've done quite a lot of walking on this odyssey; perhaps now is a good time to think a little about walking. Pilgrimage has to do with walking toward a destination, but what if the act of walking is the destination? The ley lines that Helen described have been thought of as alignments to ease Neolithic overland trekking while also being lines joining places of mystical meaning, thus imbuing the ley lines themselves with mystical meaning. While not exactly a scientific concept, this "way of seeing" may help us develop the idea of the journey as destination. The Saint's Way is often trekked by those who want to experience England (or Cornwall) by walking; can we also experience God in our journey without always thinking about what we are journeying to? Is this another way, another place where we can come upon a "thin place"? Perhaps we need multiple ways and multiple places. What is opaque for one may be "thin" for another.

Failing to fetch me at first, keep encouraged.
Missing me one place, search another,
I stop somewhere, waiting for you. (Walt Whitman, quoted in "Bearing Fruit", Lent 3)

Your Mystic Britain travel guides