



Is Merlin buried in Brittany?

*Celtic Life International correspondent
Steve Melia digs through the past*



Bruno Sotty

Where is the tomb of Merlin, the Welsh wizard who features in the legends of King Arthur? Somewhere in Wales, you might imagine... however, it actually stands in a clearing in the Forest of Paimpont in Brittany, which has become a regional centre for Arthurian legends. And while some historians call that association an 'invented tradition' - no newer than the Nineteenth Century - there is, as I would discover on the second part of my biking excursion around Brittany, certainly more to the story than that.

The forest is big by European standards, though not continuous. Small farms and clearings intersperse the trees, particularly around its fringes. I had an appointment with a man who was going to open a chateau just for me. On the way I planned to visit two legendary sites.

The first was the tomb of Merlin: two small standing stones in the middle of a circular clearing - the remains of a neolithic burial site, which was dynamited by grave robbers

in 1892. Before that, in 1820, a local magistrate, Jean Poignand, decided that this monument was the tomb of Merlin. His reasons were unclear, however his writings helped to revive interest in Celtic legends and their link, real or imagined, with the forest.

Further along the same path is the 'spring of eternal youth' - whose muddy waters have the power to reverse the ageing process. The only catch, however, is that one must be entirely free from sin for the waters to work their magic.

When I arrived at the chateau of Comper the main gate to the grounds was locked. The sky was darkening, and thunder was rumbling in the distance. As I rode through a side entrance, I half-expected to be confronted by an ogre. Instead, a young woman, Anaëlle, called out from behind me. The director had been delayed, she said, but I should leave my bike by the stables and follow her into the chateau.

Anaëlle then showed me around the 14th century chateau, which is now the 'Cen-



King Arthur statue at Tintagel Castle, Cornwall



Merlin's Tomb

tre for Arthurian Imagination.' It overlooks a lake, where a great crested grebe was diving for fish. In local legend, the lake is home to the fairy Viviane, or the Lady of the Lake as she is known in the English versions.

English Arthurian legends often differ from those of the French and Welsh. Most films, television programs, and stories about King Arthur were likely inspired by *Le Morte d'Arthur*, written by Sir Thomas Malory in 1485. The main French stories, however, were written three hundred years earlier by Chrétien de Troyes. One of these tales, *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion*, contains a spring called Barenton, within a forest called Brocéliande, the legendary name applied to the forest of Paimpont today. When Yvain pours water onto a stone beside the spring, it triggers a storm and summons a Black Knight who tries to kill him.

“That story is a key element of the question I had come here to answer: how did those legends attach themselves to this place?”

I walked around the displays, which are only open to the public on weekends for most of the year. The information boards cited stories of Chrétien de Troyes and the Celtic roots of the legends. A 3D hologram of the sword Excalibur twists and turns behind a screen, just out of reach.


The director, Sotty Sotty, arrived as I returned to the reception. An imposing man, with a bushy beard and piercing eyes, he looks convincing as a medieval storyteller. In fact, he and his staff often role-play the tales for children. In addition, they also organize conferences for researchers and aficionados.

“I came from the world of show business and cultural administration,” shared Sotty. “Like most people who work here, I wasn’t from this area. I was born in Paris. I came here as a visitor at first, and I was attracted by the magic, by the possibility of living a dream. There is nowhere else quite like it.”

One of the few things that we can say with certainty is that the Arthurian legends originated amongst the Celtic peoples of Britain. So, how did they make their way to Brittany, and, specifically, to Paimpont?



Lady of the Lake in the Chateau of Comper



The False Lovers
in the Valley of No
Return

“They came in two waves: first, from the Celtic migrations of the Early Medieval period and, later, from French writers in the later Middle Ages,” explains Sotty. “They wrote about the magical forest of Brocéliande, but none of them gave us an address. It was an imaginary place. We have one document, a 1467 charter issued by Count Guy of Laval which notes the spring of Barenton, in the forest of Brécilien, as the forest of Paimpont was called back then. The charter was rediscovered in the nineteenth century, when people began linking other local sites to the legends.”

Sotty had just returned from Tintagel, in Cornwall, where the town’s Arthurian Centre presented the legends differently, as influenced by Sir Thomas Malory.

“They tend to downplay the Celtic aspect, as Malory had a political agenda,” muses Sotty. “England was in a parlous state at that time, so he set out to write an English origin myth. But King Arthur, if he existed, was fighting against the Anglo-Saxons. And

the stories come from Celtic mythology - the grail, for example: in Chrétien de Troyes’ version, the grail is not a holy relic, it was a sacred dish of abundance, a reminder of Celtic artefacts like the Irish Cauldron of Dagda.”

Few of the chateau’s visitors were from Britain or North America, Sotty had noticed. And though most of his staff spoke fluent English, our conversation was in French. Interestingly, he had recently travelled to Wyoming, USA, where he discovered connections between the Arthurian legends and the tales of the Wild West.

“It would be good to make connections with the Breton Canadians, also,” he added.

Before departing, he offered me advice on other sites to visit, and more history on the area.

The village of Paimpont, in the centre of the forest, is clustered around a 13th century abbey and its lake, next to the Brocéliande tourist information centre. The legends have attracted many creative people, and all over the forest there are all sorts of arts and

crafts, murals, and posters for workshops. Sadly, though as expected, they have also spawned a lot of commercial kitsch, including a cardboard Merlin who welcomes you to the historic centre that is lined with businesses claiming links to the legends. My personal favourite had to be the Pizzeria du Roi, with grinning elves ready to serve up deep-dish delights, inspired by the legend of the failed hunt when King Arthur gave up and ordered a pizza.

“Characters in these legends often get lost in the woods, and I wondered if modern cartographers were helping to preserve that tradition.”

What looked like roads on the official IGN map, and on Google Maps’ recommended cycling routes, were often rough forest tracks. I got lost on the way to the spring of Barenton. In a clearing, from out of the mist, appeared a damsel, who reached into her bag

and produced a smartphone. She wasn't sure of the route either, but she pointed me towards a car park, where, she noted, it should be signposted.

The water from the spring was cleaner than the one I had seen the day before, but it seemed an unremarkable place to attract such interest. I wondered whether to wet the stone beside it, just to confirm that all that talk about raising storms was nonsense, but after my soaking the day before I decided not to risk it.

My next stop, Tréhorenteuc Church, looked like a typical village church from outside. The interesting part is inside: between 1942 and 1962, its unorthodox priest, l'Abbé Gillard, infused it with local legends. At one end is a stained-glass window, mixing Christian and Pagan imagery. A rabbit with its paw shielding its mouth whispers a secret to another. At the opposite end is a mosaic with a white hart, symbolizing both Christ and Merlin.

My last stop was the Valley of No Return, where Arthur's sister Morgane was enraged to find her lover with another woman. She turned them into two rocks (aptly named the False Lovers) and imprisoned all other knights who ventured there. Only Lancelot, whose love for Guinevere was untainted, was able to liberate them. That story had no link to Brocéliande until a 19th century noble, Blanchard de la Musse, decided to locate it there.

At the start of the climb up to the rocks is a golden tree. It was erected in 1991 after a forest fire, then chopped down by a man who believed it "degraded the forest". His efforts to defend himself in court by reciting poetry didn't impress the judge. He was fined and the sculpture was restored "with increased security" in 1999. The tree had no direct link to the local legends, so the tourist board commissioned writers to create new ones.

That process of inventing or embellishing legends goes back at least as far as the twelfth century, when Plantagenet kings ruled England and western France. The Arthurian legends provided a unifying story for the new empire. But is there any evidence that they came to Brittany any earlier? I had read conflicting accounts, so I asked Martin Aurell, Professor of Medieval History at the University of Poitiers, who replied, "That's a



Merlin welcomes tourists to the centre of Paimpont

good question. You would need a week-long seminar of the top specialists to answer it." As the written records are more recent, it is impossible to say for sure, but he believes they did arrive with those early migrants because "the legends were so popular amongst the insular Britons, and there were many contacts between them and Brittany." He points to the stories of two saints: though written down later, they refer to earlier times, and mention King Arthur.

My ride home took me through Bécherel, Brittany's "book town" and the port of Saint-Malo, where it was still warm enough to swim in the sea. I stayed in its walled city, which looks ancient from a distance, though when you look closer, you can see where most of it was rebuilt after World War 2.

Back in England I rode through Dorset and Somerset, ancient territory of the Durotriges, from where many of the Britons migrated to Brittany. In the 1970s, archaeologists excavated a hillfort associated with King Arthur at South Cadbury, in Somerset. They discovered a feasting hall and told the press they had found Camelot. Is this where Arthur won his famous battles and halted the advance of the Anglo-Saxons?

The hill with its wide flat summit came into view as I approached from the South. Behind me, and to my left, lay the uplands the Celts were defending. To the north and east lay the flatter lands, in the hands of their

enemies. I parked my bike and climbed to the summit. Cattle were grazing near one of the defensive ditches. There were views on all sides, but the site seemed very exposed. The wind was whipping my face. This was a good spot for a fort, but this was no Camelot. I stood for several minutes, imagining the defenders, scarred by past defeats. I imagined a farmer, who never wanted to fight, thinking like so many people before and since: if I get out of this alive, I will take to the seas.



Steve at Saint-Malo