

EARLY HISTORY

The parish church of Brent Knoll (formerly South Brent) is dedicated to St. Michael. Whilst he is patron saint of military personnel, paratroopers, police officers, mariners and grocers, some dedications to St. Michael are associated with churches which were dedicated on the 29th September, his feast day, but many more can be found on the top of a hill, or on the side of a hill. The church on Glastonbury Tor is an example, as is that on Berrow Mump and, of course, St. Michael's Mount. In fact, St. Michael is generally known as the Saint of High Places.

Many legends exist concerning the creation of Brent Knoll, in at least one of which St. Michael himself appears. An oft repeated tale relates how a giant, or the Devil, incensed at the beauty of the rolling hills of Mendip, which had been created by God, decided to spoil his handiwork and scar their surface. He gouged out what is now known as Cheddar Gorge, Burrington Coombe, Ebbor Gorge, etc., throwing the spoil around the countryside, thereby forming Steep Holm, Flat Holm, Brean Down, Brent Knoll, Nyland Hill, and many other similar hillocks around the area, up to, and including, Glastonbury Tor.

A less well-known alternative is provided by the Revd. William P. Gresswell, in his "*Chapters on the Early History of Glastonbury Abbey*," where he speculates that these strange features of the landscape came from a different source. "*Was it not miraculously piled up by some Titanic workers piling it up with shovelsfull of Berrow sands?*" A little far-fetched perhaps!

A third legend refers specifically to two of the hills mentioned above, but with a rather surprising twist. As far as I know it is a very local legend, which may have been handed down orally until it is described in "*A Brief History of Brent Knoll for the Village School Children*," written by Alan Oliver, the Headmaster, in 1978. He used material gleaned from villagers, who told him how the Devil and St. Michael had an argument, which ended up with them hurling mud at each other. This mud formed into two piles; one of which, being thrown by the Devil towards St. Michael, became Brent Knoll, whilst the other, thrown by St. Michael towards the

Devil, surprisingly became Glastonbury Tor. Now the question arises, why did it happen that the Devil was assigned to what has always been deemed the primary seat of Christianity in this country? That is an interesting question we shall return to later.

So far, these are obvious legends, but where does legend end and history begin? Much of *“The Early History of Glastonbury,”* written by William of Malmesbury in the early twelfth century (around 1129), strays between reality and legend (have things changed very much in Glastonbury even today?). In this history, William noted that King Arthur gave Brent to Glastonbury Abbey. His reason for doing so defines another well-known legend of the hill. *“We read,”* says William, *“in the deeds of the most illustrious King Arthur that at Caerleon one Christmas he distinguished with military honours a most vigorous youth named Ider, the son of King Nuth, and, in order to try him, led him to Frog Mountain, now called Brent Knoll, to do battle with three giants notorious for their wickedness, who he had learnt were there. This young soldier had gone on ahead of Arthur and his companions without their knowing it and had boldly attacked the giants, whom he killed in a terrible slaughter. After he had done so, Arthur arrived and finding Ider weak from excessive exertion and helplessly lying in a trance where he had fallen, he and his companions began to lament that the youth was almost dead. So, he returned home unutterably sad, leaving behind the body that he thought was lifeless, until he could send a conveyance there to bring it back. He considered himself responsible for the young man’s death because he had come to his aid too late, and so, when he returned to Glastonbury, he established 80 monks there for his soul, generously granting them lands and territories for their sustenance, as well as gold, silver, chalices and other ecclesiastical ornaments.”*

The lands and territories described here are clearly intended to be located in Brent and Polden. Confirmation of that comes later when the *“possessions of Glastonbury given by English converts to the faith”* are listed. This section summarises grants to Glastonbury and includes, as the first item, *“Firstly King Arthur in the time of the Britons gave Brent Marsh and Poweldone, with many other lands in the neighbourhood, for the soul of Ider, as has been mentioned above; these lands were fallen upon and taken away by the English when they were pagans, but later restored, with many others, after their conversion to the faith.”* Some of these comments are, apparently, *“a marginal interpolation in a later C13 hand,”* others may be C14, but the facts are also found in an alternative copy of the manuscript, providing further weight to their general acceptance at that period.

The next item referring to Brent Knoll, however, is almost certain to have been part of William’s original manuscript. It relates how, *“King Ine gave 20 hides at Brent Knoll...”* and continues with many other grants by the same king. In the fourteenth century, John of Glastonbury, in his *“Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey,”* [James P. Carley, with translation by David Townsend, The Boydell Press 1985], reported a similar story. He talks of how *“The glorious Arthur, King of the Britons, gave Brent Marsh and Polden, [to Glastonbury Abbey] along with many other lands located in the neighbourhood. The Anglo-Saxons, who arrived as pagans, took these holdings away but afterwards, converted to the faith, restored them along with others.”* Noticeably, John of Glastonbury refers to the Ider incident as taking place in North Wales, on the mountain of Areynes. He also asserts that Arthur established only twenty-four monks for the sake of the young man’s soul. However, he does explicitly specify Brent and Polden as the prime territories given.

John continues by recalling that King Ine gave twenty hides at Brent to the Abbey, though the earliest surviving charter of King Ine refers to 10 hides of land at *“Brente,”* which may well include both modern Brent Knoll and East Brent. Heather Edwards, in *“The Charters of the Early West Saxon kingdom,”* [BAR British Series 198, 1988] concludes that *“every Glastonbury record of charters or lands attributes to Ine the grant of either 10 hides at ‘Brente’ or 20 hides at ‘Brentemorse’”* The latter, often referred to as ‘Brentemarais,’ agrees with the total quoted in Domesday Book. *“Since each record mentions one estate or the other, but not both,”* she deduces, *“it seems that there are two versions of one grant, not two distinct grants of two estates, and that ‘Brentemarais’ is to be identified with ‘Brente’.”* A proof of this does appear to be shown by William of Malmesbury, who mentions *“Brentacnolle qui nunc Brentamirise decitur.”* (Brent Knoll which is now known as Brent Marsh.)

Twenty-one years after first granting the land to Glastonbury, King Ine apparently found it necessary to confirm the concession as “*a precaution against future events.*” The document affirms that, “*they should remain entirely quit of all royal exactions and should remain untouched by the promulgations and interference of all archbishops and bishops.*” In fact, he forbade “*the bishop’s presumption to establish his episcopal throne in Glastonbury or the churches subject to it.*” Amongst the churches explicitly mentioned was that at Brent. The document ends with an admonition to the bishop who “*shall also take care every year, along with his clerks at Wells, to acknowledge his mother, the church at Glastonbury, with a litany on the second ferial day after the Lord’s ascension.*” [The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey – see above].

Do these excerpts demonstrate the existence of an early Celtic church in Brent Knoll? Or, perhaps, only a Saxon church? Some early church histories deduced that a charming pillar, now set into the east wall of the north aisle, was a clear confirmation of the latter. Subsequently, this deduction has been shown to be inaccurate; it is actually from the Norman period. So, there is no known archaeological or architectural evidence to substantiate such a claim. The hypothesis that a church existed prior to the Norman period can only be correctly demonstrated if there is documentary evidence, or that an archaeological survey discovers some remains which can be identified as such. The problem is, how much of the existing documentary evidence is reliable and how much is a rather more sophisticated form of legend?

Unfortunately, this specific document, attesting King Ine’s generosity, is neither history nor legend. It is a well-attested forgery. Which is not quite the same thing as saying that it is entirely invalid. King Ine probably did make the gifts proposed there. Earlier documents appear to attest this. However, though it is reported in both William of Malmesbury and in John of Glastonbury, plus transcripts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this particular document had a very different purpose, connected with the politics of a later period.

Particularly pertinent is the fact that the Abbot of Glastonbury and the Bishop of Bath and Wells became embroiled in a rather nasty confrontation over territorial rights and prestige. Did the Abbot owe allegiance to the Bishop in whose See Glastonbury happened to be, or did the Abbey have privileges which meant he was independent of the Bishop’s jurisdiction? If Glastonbury could not provide documentary evidence of their entitlements, their case could be easily challenged. Original charters must be available to authenticate their claims. Luckily, or should I say, conveniently, documents written by King Ine suddenly materialised. Now Glastonbury could assert its rights over the claims of an avaricious bishop. Both ownership of land and independence from the authority of the See were assured. Mind you, they were a bit cheeky about the constraints on the Bishop, particularly as it is in the 12th century that bishops attempted to assert their authority over Glastonbury and it was not until 1192 AD that Savaric became the Bishop of Bath and, shortly after, presumed to establish his throne at Glastonbury!

Luckily, modern techniques of authentication were unknown at that time. So, burning the midnight oil to produce such documents, and maybe, adding a little dirt to age them, would pass muster as long as the ink was dry! Pertinent signatures, and topographical features, presumed to exist in the originals, would provide authentication. However, the reference to the bishop’s clerks at Wells is also a little surprising, given that the See of Wells was not carved out of the former See of Sherborne until 909 (King Ine ruled from 688 until 726).

So, this document actually proves nothing about an early church in Brent Knoll. Unless some archaeological or documentary evidence is forthcoming regarding an earlier building on the site of St. Michael’s, we must assume that the first church to be built on the site is the one for which we do have architectural proof.

Most of the existing building is from the Perpendicular period or later, But, both documentation and some existing features do demonstrate a Norman origin. The pillar, mentioned above, is one, as is the south doorway. There are also a number of features from the architectural periods between. William, in his History, written in the first half of the twelfth century, would be writing about a church he knew to exist. So that gives us a first validated mention of a church on this site, with a date which ties in well with the earliest extant architectural features.

Domesday Book records that “*The church holds Brent itself. Before 1066 it paid tax for 20 hides...Value to the Abbot £50; when the Abbot acquired it, £15.*” A number of people rented parts of this land from the Abbot after the Conquest, but the Domesday Book declares, “*Those who held from the Abbot before 1066 could not be separated from the church.*” So, at the time of this great survey of England, Brent was changing, due to the Conquest, from being merely one part of the larger Glastonbury estate, to become a community in which various landlords rented land from their Glastonbury landlord. Previously we may assume that the produce of the land helped to maintain the community within the Abbey, using the local rivers as their highway, whenever possible (probably the River Axe initially, though that became an issue later). Now, as the influence of Glastonbury is no longer direct, administration would be more at arm’s length, so there would be a greater need for a church.

One item that is of particular interest in this record is the breakdown of the holdings. Roger de Courceulles holds 1 hide (considered to be sufficient land to support one family, around 120 acres, though this could change depending on the type of land available), Ralph of Conteville 5 virgates (a virgate was approximately one quarter of a hide, so normally about thirty acres), Aelfric, son of Everwacer, 5 virgates and Godwin the priest 1½ hides. It has been proposed (Costen, M, *The Origins of Somerset*, (1992) p 154) that this reference to a priest suggests that there was a church here before the conquest, i.e. an Anglo-Saxon church. However, the Domesday Book reference, as mentioned above, did state, “*Those who held from the Abbot before 1066 could not be separated from the church,*” which does seem to imply that the above named holders received their grants after the conquest, which would certainly be true of the first three, so surely must also include the priest. That may, more likely, suggest that the first church was built here a little earlier, perhaps between 1066 and 1086, when the Domesday Book was compiled.

By the second half of the twelfth century, in the 1170s, another record states that, during the time whilst Robert, formerly Prior of Winchester, was Abbot, the churches of Pilton and South Brent fell from the patronage of the monastery at Glastonbury. The early power struggle between the Abbot and the Bishop continued unabated until Robert, we are told, was persuaded by Reginald, Bishop of Bath (the Wells part was dropped at this time) to become a Canon of Wells. Surprisingly he acceded to the Bishop’s proposal, even though he must have known it was a ploy to curtail the independence of the Abbey. The Abbot took some churches with him as his prebend, but soon realised that he did not like the subjection this entailed, and his monks were certainly most unhappy about it. He relinquished the canonry, with the Pope’s blessing, but also found that the Pope would not allow him to do so scot free, so he was unable to reclaim his former prebend churches, which remained within the jurisdiction of the See as compensation to the bishop. Eventually, because of this, South Brent church was annexed to the Archdeacon of Wells, although he was obliged to do fealty to the church of Glastonbury for it, and the power struggle continued.

Which means that we can definitely claim at least an early twelfth century church on this site; one which, shortly after, became, because of its patronage by the Archdeacon of Wells, a thorn in the side of Glastonbury. Set in the midst of Abbey owned lands, it was a convenient centre for at least one side of the propaganda war between these two feuding authorities.