

# In search of King Arthur round Stroud

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**JUDITH STARES meets a self-taught historian who is convinced that the legendary Camelot lies beneath the ancient valley village of Woodchester**

*Pictures: Brian Donnan*

DEBRETT'S, the royal genealogists, have set up a committee of experts to study the latest evidence on the King Arthur legend, and the possibility that young Prince William may be the King's direct descendant. The news has come as no surprise to Ronald Fletcher of Eastcombe, near Stroud.

For the past eleven years, this retired civil engineer has been conducting an exhaustive investigation of his own, and the walls of his home are lined with reference works. Now he feels certain that not only was Arthur very much a figure of fact, rather than fiction - but he was born, did battle, and was finally buried in Gloucestershire.

This fascinating detective story began in 1972, when Mr. Fletcher was recovering from a bout of ill-health: "At the time a Sunday paper was running a series of articles on the Arthurian legend, and there were excavations going on at Cadbury Castle in Somerset, where they hoped to find the remains of Camelot. I noticed that a lot of the names in the articles sounded familiar. For instance, Arthur's famous last battle was at Camlann. I knew Cam in Gloucestershire, and when I learned that the battle was supposed to have been fought after Arthur and his men had crossed the Severn, I grew more curious."

Mr. Fletcher began to delve deeper into the legend, which even today baffles academics. "The world is divided into two camps," he says. "Those who believe King Arthur really existed, and those who claim he was only a myth. I have had to approach the subject as a complete beginner, and now I am convinced he was a real person. I am also convinced that Camelot lies dormant under the village of Woodchester, near Stroud."

To explain ten years of painstaking research to any audience requires patience on both sides, but among the pages of his ten-volume thesis are nuggets of information certain to raise the eyebrows of even a confirmed sceptic.

The main obstacle to understanding has been the multitudinous tongues in which the Arthurian history has been written, and Mr. Fletcher can now claim a more than passable working knowledge of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Turkish and Egyptian. "When the Roman army settled here, it brought conscripts from every part of the world, and they each brought their own language," he says. "It was something of a Tower of Babel, and it is not at all surprising to find that different words mean exactly the same thing. I have had to teach myself to read all the ancient languages."

Many believe that Arthur was born in Tintagel, Cornwall, but reference books reveal that his birthplace was known as Dindageoul - an ancient spelling for Daglingworth, near Cirencester. Interestingly, this village is still "royal" today, as part of Prince Charles's Duchy of Cornwall. Fascinating, too, is the fact that one of Arthur's major battles was at Badon - an ancient spelling of Bath!

"We are talking about the period roughly around 400 AD, and in those days every tribe had its own leader, or king," says Mr. Fletcher. "From the sources I have studied it appears that Arthur and his tribe were pushed over the Severn into Wales by the Saxons, and most of his adult life, and the stories we hear, concern his efforts to recapture his own territory."

In Mr. Fletcher's view, one of the key pieces of evidence in the mystery lies four feet under the earth, on the Roman mosaic pavement at Woodchester. Inscribed on it are four words, the second of which is incomplete: *Binnii, C. . . . Bonum Eventum.*

Many historians believe that the missing word is *Coeli*, meaning "Heaven". Mr. Fletcher feels that *Coeli* might also

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have been seen by later generations as a version of Celliwic, which is not only the ancient word for Camelot but also, more surprisingly, means Woodchester!

"This area was the centre of the vast mass of lower Britain, and the richest part of the country for ore and minerals," he says. "It is extremely probable that the capital was right here, and not in London."

As for the sword Excalibur, there is a neat local explanation for that, too: The lower end of the Severn was traditionally called the Sword Ora. Around it is another area, still known as the Whitstone Hundred to this day. After a successful battle, it could quite literally be claimed that Arthur had wrested the "sword" from the "stone", and the words "ex coeli bur" are a straight translation of "from the borough of Coeli". It should be noted that such romantic touches as arms clothed in white rising from the waters were left to later chroniclers.

A willing suspension of disbelief is sometimes necessary when accompanying Mr. Fletcher on the trail of his hero, but it is just as well to remember that those Dark Ages are simply dark because nobody has shed light on them, and one explanation can often prove as good as any other.

Even dates are spurious. Each monastery kept its own diary, and as the first entry always began in Anno I, it is not surprising that events become distorted. "I have studied records of the same person fighting the same battle in 449 AD, again in 560 AD and yet again in 700 AD," says Mr. Fletcher. "Obviously, they cannot have lived for that length of time, but equally obviously they were the same person."

The most persuasive possibility concerns Arthur's purported burial: "Legend has it that he is buried in Glastonbury, but from my research I believe this to be false. It is extremely likely that the monks there needed money, and it paid them to spread such a legend."

A far more acceptable tale concerns the well-documented story of Ambrosius, recognised to be one of Arthur's many pseudonyms. The story goes that he was buried near a white hill between London and Amberley, and that there is a white ring as a landmark: "Most historians have concluded that London is the one we know as the capital, but it seems far more likely to me to have referred to Little London, the area of Woodchester."

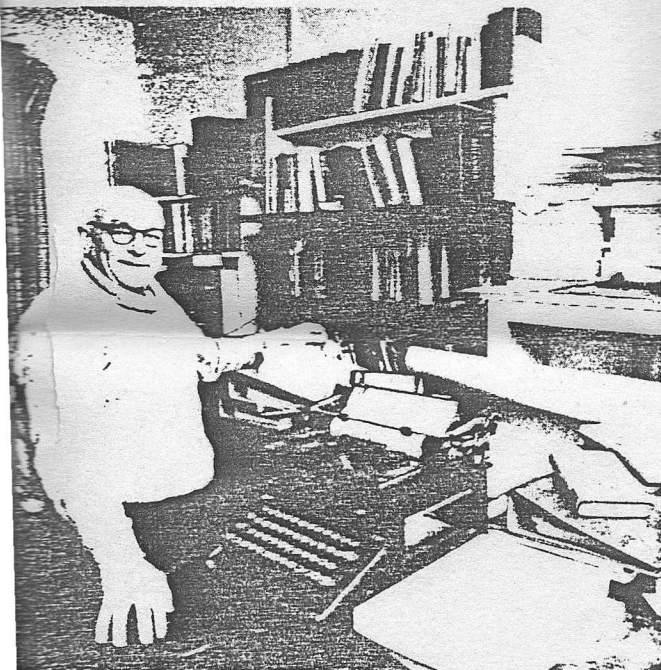
Appropriately enough, Whiteshill, near Stroud, is conveniently close to both Little London and the Gloucestershire Amberley, and there is even an impressive circular scar on a hillside near by. Yet another ancient document claims that seven kings are buried on a large hill in this area, an Arthur among them.

Short of a mammoth excavation, it seems unlikely that the mystery will be solved. But Mr. Fletcher hopes that the publication of his thesis might persuade the authorities to allow at least a trial dig in the area, and to that end he is now condensing some 8,000 pages of work to a more commercial length.

"As far as I can make out, no-one ever checked back to ancient sources as I have done," he says. "I have even collected the Irish and Welsh records where Arthur's name is mentioned, dissected all the poems concerning him, and investigated every place where battles are mentioned. New facts are coming to light all the time, so you can imagine why the written work has taken so long. My only consolation is that it took Gibbon 17 years to write *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*."

Various personalities with similar Arthurian obsessions. Bamber Gascoigne and Ross McWhirter among them, have compared notes with Mr. Fletcher and gone away impressed. With the arrival of a future king and his family in Gloucestershire, it could well be that now is an appropriate time to reassess the historical worth of the county, and if this happens Mr. Fletcher is confident that his efforts will be vindicated.

"It has cost me thousands of pounds to undertake this research, but it has been worth every penny," he says. "It started as a hobby, but when you suddenly discover that all these exciting events happened on your doorstep, it gives you a great incentive to carry on."



Ronald Fletcher at work in his book-lined study in Eastcombe, (left), and (above), on site at Woodchester, scene, in his view, of Arthur's legendary capital city of Camelot.