

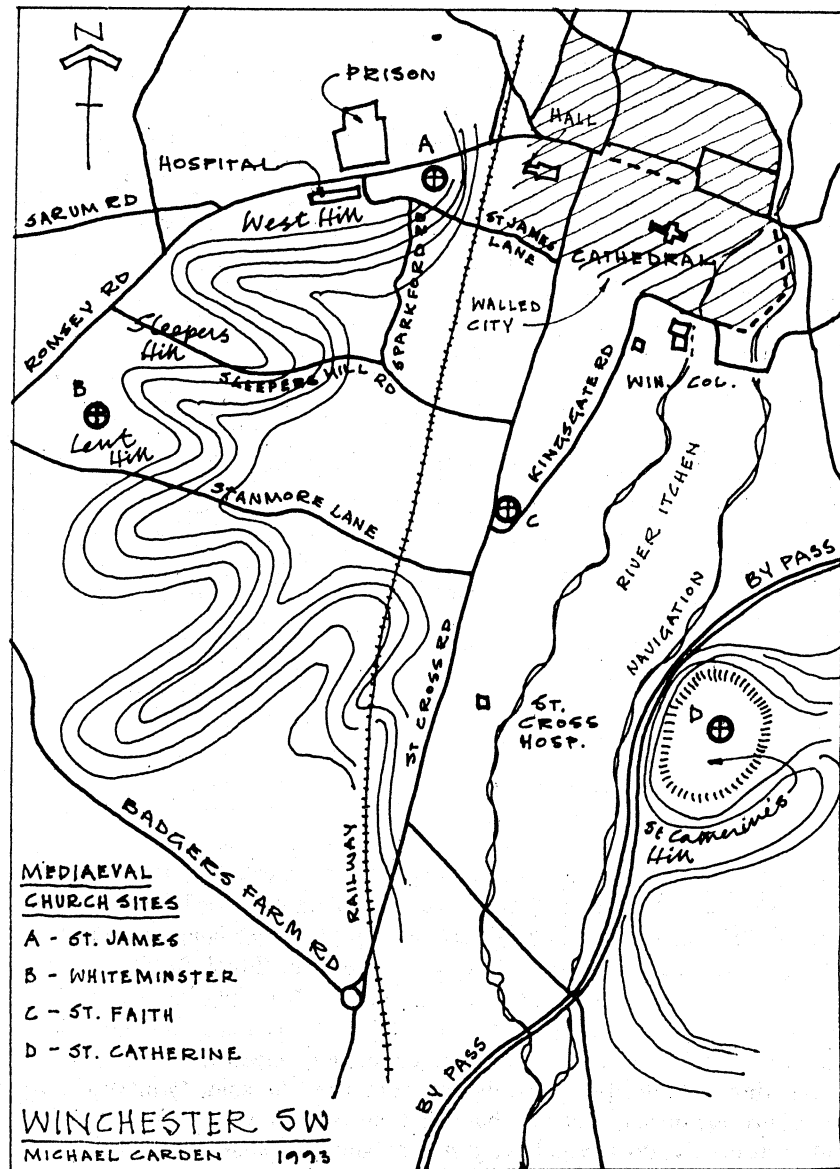
### THE BUTTERFLY BISHOP AND KING ARTHUR

by Peter Gallup

Peter des Roches was bishop of Winchester from 1205 to 1238. He is mentioned in the Chronicle of Lanercost Priory,<sup>1</sup> in connection with a strange and interesting legend about which the editor of the transcription added this footnote: 'there are few tales in our early chronicles which compete, either in plot or narrative, with this legend of the Butterfly Bishop.'<sup>2</sup> It seems that this story has been forgotten by most Winchester folk and that, accordingly, a few notes may not be out of place.

The translation from the Latin into English runs as follows:<sup>3</sup>

1216 Here I will set down what I have heard from men older than myself about Peter des Roches, bishop of Winchester, as I have had occasion to mention him. This man was vain and worldly, as I have had occasion to mention him. This man was vain and worldly, as has become too much the way of our prelates; on one occasion he took, as was his habit, some huntsmen and went to a forest which belonged to his bishopric to pursue game, as he required pleasure rather than healing souls. When the huntsmen had been placed in a wood in order to beat it and so were separated from him, it so happened that the bishop, who was making his way over level ground, saw a beautiful new house which was hitherto unknown to him. He admired its charm, was amazed that anyone could conceive it, and hastened to take a closer look. So, as he was approaching it, there ran towards him a number of servants splendidly dressed, who hastily urged him to come at once to the feast of the king, who was expecting him; he hesitated and excused himself, saying that he had with him no dress suitable for a bishop's dinner-party. They however put on him a suitable mantle and brought him into the court to the presence of the king, who greeted him as his guest. He took his place on the right of this great prince, where there were placed before him dishes and drinks of choice quality. This however did not deter him from asking the king during the meal who he was and from whence he had come: the king declared that he was Arthur, once overlord of the whole kingdom of Britain. Peter congratulated him and asked him if he was well: 'In truth,' he replied, 'I look for God's great mercy'. The bishop then said, 'My lord, who will believe me when I say that on this day I saw or spoke to King Arthur?' The king replied 'Close your right hand,' and as he did so he continued, 'Open it': when he did so, out flew a butterfly. 'Throughout your life,' he said, 'you will have this as my memorial, that at whatever time of year you wish to see this kind of insect fly, do as you have just done and your wish will be fulfilled.' This sign later became so well known that men often asked for a butterfly as a blessing, and many used to call him the Butterfly Bishop. What by this the soul of Arthur wished to teach men to the present day, let him reflect who is able to guess.



As far as is known at present this is the only written description of the incident except for a reference by Brian Vesey-FitzGerald in his book entitled *Winchester*, published in 1953:<sup>4</sup> he places the incident at Sleepers Hill in Winchester. It is of considerable interest that there is evidence that the memory may have been preserved in Winchester. One informant, who was a boy before the first war, was told of a connection between King Arthur and Sleepers Hill. Another informant before 1920 used to walk down Sleepers Hill with his mother who told him that King Arthur was asleep there. A third reports a vague memory of being told of three men who went up Sleepers Hill, had a vision and that an angel was involved. Several others have childhood memories concerning people sleeping on Sleepers Hill, but these may possibly have arisen through the need to find the answer to the question why this rather inconspicuous hill is called Sleepers Hill. But these meagre details seem to imply that a legend is attached to Sleepers Hill, that there was magic in which sleepers played their part, and that the story may indeed have been handed down in Winchester from the thirteenth century.

The legend is recorded in Latin in the Chronicle of Lanercost Priory which was an Augustinian community founded in 1220. The chronicle runs from 1201 to 1346 and is thought to have been influenced by the Franciscans whose important friary was situated in nearby Carlisle. The entry in the chronicle is dated 1216 and as the community was not founded until 1220 the legend was certainly written down after the event, and at an unknown date after 1220.

The accompanying map shows that Sleepers Hill is one of three hill features extending from the chalk downs to the west of Winchester into the valley of the river Itchen. West Hill was the part of the walled town upon which was built the castle of William the Conqueror and the fortified West Gate. An early extension of the town developed outside the gate which included the church of St James, recognised today by the Roman Catholic Cemetery on Romsey Road. Next to the south is Sleepers Hill which appears to have been rough woodland until developed with substantial housing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among the archives of the Dean and Chapter there is a note in the Treasurer's Book dated 1683 which reads describing the land at the top of Sleepers Hill: 'Land adjoining, about ten acres, now laid waste, open to the broad highway (Romsey Road), which is never ploughed but left for the passage of carts and horses.' Also, marked on a roughly drawn estate map of 1751 is a small rectangular feature at the top of Sleepers Hill, close to Romsey Road, called Sleepers Dell. The significance of these details is unknown, but they might suggest that for some historical reason this plot of land was kept from common use. Apparently there was no road over Sleepers Hill until St Mary's Road which is marked for the first time on the Survey of 1870. The road was first described as Sleepers Hill Road on the map of 1966. The hill feature is

named Sleepers Hill on a manorial map of 1649. It was part of Fromond Manor which, in turn, was a part of the ancient estate of Chilcomb, that belt of land surrounding Winchester traditionally said to have been given to the church by King Cynegil of Wessex on his conversion to Christianity in the seventh century. At the Domesday survey there were nine churches in this land which included St James (Romsey Road), St Faith, Sparkford (St Cross Road), St Catherine on the Hill, and Whiteminster which is thought to have been situated near Pitt corner at the top of Stanmore Lane.

The third hill feature, Lent Hill, lay between Sleepers Hill and Stanmore Lane, the area occupied today by part of the Stanmore housing development and the modern church of St Luke. The name Lent Hill may derive from the penitential processions which used to take place between the Old Minster and the four churches named, during Lent and in times of grave emergency.

#### *Peter des Roches*

The bishop, Peter des Roches, had every right to hunt on Sleepers Hill as it was church land. The suggestion that he was vain and worldly is not surprising as Winchester, being at this time a rich bishopric, was given by the king to important ministers of the crown, and Peter was said to be more at home in a military camp than in the palace of a bishop. He was a Norman from Poitou, and as a foreigner was disliked by the nobility. The monks of St Swithun called him a 'hard man' and, being in close attendance on three kings, Richard Coeur de Lion, John and Henry of Winchester, historians called him their 'evil counsellor'. However, scholars describe him as a great ecclesiastical figure who was the friend and companion of popes, emperors and kings. There is little doubt but that he would have been heartily disliked in England as being one of the foreigners holding high office under the king, but when he died the contemporary historian Matthew Paris referred to the 'irreparable loss to the councils both of church and state'.

The Annals of Winchester record that the bishop departed on pilgrimage to Compostela in 1221, and later to the Holy Land (1227-31).<sup>5</sup> During the later years of his episcopacy he



founded more religious communities than any other bishop of Winchester.

On his death at Farnham Castle in 1238 his heart was buried in Waverley Abbey, near Farnham, and his body was brought to Winchester, where he was buried with due ceremony in the cathedral.<sup>6</sup> Bishop Milner in his *History of Winchester* describes the effigy of a bishop in black marble which lay in his time close to the north wall of the nave, between the burial of Bishop Morley and the font. This could have indicated the fourth bay from the transept on the wall of which now is the memorial to Edward Cole. It is clear that the paving beside the wall has been relaid. In the nineteenth century many monuments were moved and the effigy in Purbeck marble was moved to its present position beside the chantry chapel of Bishop Waynflete in the retrochoir.<sup>7</sup> The chronicle states that the bishop was given the power to produce a butterfly at any time, which includes the depth of winter. It has been established that even on the shortest day of the year the noonday sun shines across this fourth bay. As is well known tortoiseshell butterflies frequently seek the warmth of the cathedral, and black limestone is warmer to the touch than, say, white marble. The sun would have increased this warmth, and this fact may be considered significant.

#### *King Arthur*

For the purpose of this article the figure of Arthur is considered to have originated in an historical Celtic chieftain with experience of Roman military organisation who, in the years before and after AD 500, emerged from Wales and checked the advance from the east of the invading Anglo-Saxons, and died between 510 and 540. Celtic exiles from Britain to Brittany at this time would have taken with them the memory of Arthur, together with Celtic mythology including legends to do with the Celtic god Artaios. These stories were romanticised in the English possessions in France and were brought back to England between 1150 and 1200 as stories about King Arthur and his knights and their acts of Christian chivalry. It is suggested that these two threads, the Celtic and the Anglo-French legends, came to be combined in the great spiritual myth of the Matter of Britain, the once and future Christian King, who sleeps beneath the hill until his country needs him.

#### *The Legend*

It is no wonder that King Arthur should appear in Winchester in a story of the thirteenth century. Arthur, one of the Elizabethan Nine Worthies, has been known through the centuries, and throughout Europe and the Middle East. His name recurs continually in the history of England and Winchester. In 1197 Richard Coeur de Lion presented King Tancred of Sicily with the supposed sword Excalibur. The chronicler at Lanercost identified Winchester with the legend at some unknown date after 1220, and between 1250 and 1280 the Round Table was set up in the Great Hall

of Winchester.<sup>8</sup> About 1450 Malory in his *Morte d'Arthur* expressed his belief that Winchester was Camelot and that the marriage of King Arthur took place here. Henry VII made sure that his Celtic, and therefore Arthurian, roots were recognised when he arranged for his son Arthur to be born and baptised in Winchester in 1487. Henry VIII arranged for the painting of the Round Table so that this great antiquity might be shown to Charles V, the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, on his visit in 1522.

The Elizabethan poets saw Elizabeth I as Gloriana from whose court would issue the virtuous knights to restore Britain to her ancient glory. Finally, in the nineteenth century Lord Tennyson revived the romantic legend with its spiritual emphasis; the grievous rift in the fellowship of the Round Table is followed by the mortal wound dealt by his nephew Mordred, and the passing of Arthur to the west:

To the island-valley of Avilion;  
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,  
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies  
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard lawns  
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea,  
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound.<sup>9</sup>

And so he remains in the English mind as the Once and Future King, ready at all times for the summons.

#### *Sleepers Hill*

Arthur is asleep in various places in England, Scotland and Wales. That he should sleep is no surprise in the context of world mythology. The Greek poet Epimenides slept in a cave for 57 years and awoke possessing all wisdom. The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, at the time of Roman persecution of Christians, slept for 240 years and when they emerged they were greeted with joy and astonishment and as a vindication of faith in the Resurrection. Two emperors of the Holy Roman Empire, Charlemagne and Barbarossa, sleep and will awake at the needful time. At the sack of Constantinople in 1453 the priest was celebrating Mass in Hagia Sophia when the Turks burst in. He safeguards the Holy Sacrament until the day when the Turks are cast out.<sup>10</sup> It is no wonder that Arthur is remembered as the sleeper. It is memorable that he sleeps in Winchester, the ancient capital of England.

So, what did happen on that day when Peter of Winchester went hunting? We cannot say. The story appears to have come from the bishop, and bishops of Winchester are not, nor ever have been, prone to make up idle stories. King Arthur, or the Celtic leader, had been dead for 700 years so that he never saw Arthur in flesh and blood. But here we encounter the

interesting distinction between seeing and 'seeing', in fact or in the mind's eye. The latter form of vision was the gift of medieval man and it should not be ignored. They saw more than we do, and perhaps we are the losers. They would say that we are very dull and prosaic and that in our demand for proof we miss a great deal which is important. Bishop Peter saw no mean vision when he said he saw the Past and Future King, the saviour who sleeps until his people need him.

It may be of interest to consider the date which is recorded by the chronicler. 1216 for England and for Peter des Roches stood out as a particularly terrible year. Peter was the right hand man of the king. King John had alienated the barons and brought on civil war. England was ungovernable and the French, under Louis, had invaded. The south country was virtually under their control and the French held Winchester Castle, just across the valley from Sleepers Hill. Peter, as a Royalist and a foreigner, was extremely unpopular. He must have felt very lonely and in fear both for himself and for England. Surely this was the time of all times when Peter might have looked back to the days of great men and Christian knighthood. He could well have yearned for the return of the saviour, represented by Arthur. At that moment he might have seen or heard the local pilgrimage passing by, led by the Cross from the monastery of St Swithun and singing penitential psalms as it went its way.

In historical fact the conclusion was that in October 1216 King John died, Henry III was crowned by Peter des Roches and the civil war was ended. In the following year Louis returned home with his French army and peace was restored.

The writer of the chronicle asks what we think the soul of Arthur wished to teach us through what took place that day. To be asked such a thoughtful question after the passage of 700 years is of no little interest. The question suggests that what mattered to the bishop matters to us and that therefore we should take note.

Spiritual truths are expressed by way of symbol. The butterfly has since early times symbolised the human soul and the rising to New Life. Possibly the hunting bishop was being recalled to his spiritual responsibilities and to the essential importance of the things eternal. Perhaps he, receiving the gift which he in turn must pass on, was being reminded of the people of Hampshire longing for spiritual leadership. England had been under interdict between 1208 and 1214 when there was no Mass, no marriage in church and no burial in consecrated ground. The people round him must have been longing for a sign of the pastoral care and ministry of their bishop.

There is another point which seems worthy of consideration. King Arthur gives the bishop the power to produce and to hand on butterflies as blessings

to his people. This signifies divine gift — which only God can initiate. Thus the king represents the divine Saviour.

The chronicler asks the reader to come to his own conclusion. That might include the thought that the truth of Arthur, apart from history, is an ever living legend of which Winchester preserves a precious strand.

There is a great deal more than can be said, but at this point we must leave King Arthur and his knights peaceful under the hill, in the hope that Winchester will never forget the great myth, the Matter of Britain, which is enshrined in the legend. We go forward in the hope that there will never be the need for Arthur to awake to save his country, and that accordingly the sword Excalibur may remain in the safe keeping of that arm 'clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful'.<sup>11</sup>

NOTES

1. *Chronicon de Lanercost, MCCI-MCCCXLVI*, ed. Joseph Stevenson, Maitland Club (Edinburgh, 1839); an edition of BL Cotton MS Claud. D.vii. Fos. 176-176v (p. 23).
2. *Ibid.*, notes, p. 374.
3. The translation was kindly supplied by Mr Austin Whitaker.
4. Brian Vesey-FitzGerald, *Winchester* (London, 1953), pp. 132-3.
5. *Annales de Wintonia*, ed. H. R. Luard, *Annales Monastici*, i, Rolls Series 36 (1865), 84-6.
6. *Annales de Waverleia*, in *ibid.*, 319.
7. R. N. Quirk, 'The Monuments of Prior Basing and the "Old Bishop in Marble"', *WCR* 23 (1954), 12-21, at 15.
8. Martin Biddle and Beatrice Clayre, *Winchester Castle and Great Hall* (Winchester, 1983), p. 40.
9. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King: The Passing of Arthur*, lines 427-32: *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 3 vols. 2nd edn. 1987, iii, 559.
10. For other examples of 'sleepers', see Sabine Baring-Gould, *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages*, 1866, new edn. (London, 1977), 49.
11. Tennyson, *Passing of Arthur*, line 327.