

Industrial Magic

The Real Wizards of Alderley Edge



The image of the wizard has become synonymous with the Cheshire village of Alderley Edge largely thanks to a nineteenth century legend. Yet the deeper history of the area suggests that the village's connection to such magical figures is far from fantasy and in fact may be the result of a very real, if extraordinary, historical legacy.

A Grail Quest

In early 2021, a news story broke regarding Stonehenge that had the potential to completely reframe how we think of Britain's most iconic prehistoric monument. It was one of those stories that genuinely gave cause for reappraisal, a literal tear-up the textbook moment. Chasing a theory that he had long held dear, Professor Mike Parker Pearson of University College London - perhaps best known to most as a contributor to the archeological series *Time Team* - had finally found his personal holy grail; the site in West Wales that was the original home of the Stonehenge bluestones.

The bluestones - so called due to their blue tinge when broken - stand amongst the larger sarsens of the famous Wiltshire monument, and whilst they may be seen as less imposing than the sarsen built trilithons, it is the bluestones that have long been known to be the earliest stones erected at the site. Whilst the larger sarsen stones had been quarried locally, the bluestones had been born of a unique geology present 150 miles away in Pembrokeshire's Preseli Hills.

If the issue of how a prehistoric people were able to transport such objects across the land of Wales to Salisbury Plain was seemingly impossible question of engineering, the question of why they did it was its equally impossible philosophical partner.

However, Professor Mike and his team had discovered something remarkable. Targeting sites across the Preseli Hills in search of a precise location of the Stonehenge throughout 2017/18, they had cause to zone-in on a site known as Waun Mawn. There, they discovered that the site had originally been home to a 110-metre diameter stone circle precisely matching the dimensions of the circle that the bluestones had originally formed at Stonehenge. Further corresponding discoveries were then made using a form of scientific wizardry known as *Optically Stimulated Luminescence* - a method for measuring ionising radiation - and a stunning conclusion began to present itself. The bluestones of Stonehenge were the very same bluestones of Waun Mawn, where they had stood independently for around four-hundred years before being transported east to Salisbury plain and to create the site that is world renowned today.

The puzzling question as to why Stonehenge contained stones quarried from the Preseli Hills suddenly had an answer; as they were effectively the worlds heaviest flat-pack, the Preseli culture that had first erected them likely undertook a process of migration onto the Salisbury Plain around 3000 BCE. Yet as important and interesting Professor Mikes find undoubtedly was, for fans of legend and folklore, there was an even more incredible implication of as a result of the discovery; the direct credence it

gave to an ancient myth long dismissed by all ‘serious’ historians.

Twelfth century writer Geoffrey of Monmouth is best remembered to us by his work *The History of the Kings of Britain*, in which his inclusion of Arthurian myths has come to be seen as so influential the topic alone subject is today divided into “pre-Galfridian” and “post-Galfridian” sections. Amongst this weaving of history and myth, there is a story included that directly pertains to the origins of Stonehenge, of how the monument was transported to its present site from another location courtesy of that classic engineer of the mythological, the magician Merlin.

Although the story the Monmouth includes states the original home of the monument being in Ireland, at its heart it proves to be an uncanny foreshadowing of the recent archeological discovery. As the geography of ancient myths go, 150 miles west of Salisbury Plain is as good as Ireland; and so, it now appears that the recording of the Merlin story 900 years ago is in fact a literary commitment to the memory of an event that took place over 4000 years before.

Perhaps we should not be quite so surprised, after all the figure of Merlin is no stranger to the shadows of our ancient sites and in one particularly complex prehistorical landscape of North West Britain, his image has never been far away. In light of the ‘truth’ now apparent in the Monmouth Stonehenge myth, perhaps the legend of the wizard of Alderley Edge too has its origins in something far more tangible than mere fantasy.

Legacy of Lore

The Cheshire village of Alderley Edge is best known to us today as commuter hub of Manchester, which together with its neighbouring villages of Prestbury and Mottram St. Andrew, home to numerous celebrities and millionaire footballers, is known as one of the most affluent areas in the whole of the UK. Part of the village’s charm lies in the fact that it is surrounded by Cheshire countryside, with the wooded sandstone escapement - the “Edge” - acting as a beacon for the areas hikers, dog walkers and day trippers alike as it rises over 100 meters above the surrounding Cheshire plain. This rural area, managed by the National Trust, is also a designated “Site of Special Scientific Interest” due to its unique geology and is peppered by notable historical features.

Some of these features, like the beacon mound which once formed part of the Armada invasion warning system that was in place across England during the reign of Elizabeth I, are well known locally. However, with most things in this ancient landscape, we are never far from a mysterious totem of prehistory; the beacon itself is built atop a Bronze

Age burial mound; a subtle clue to the importance that the local landscape held in prehistory, not least because of the vast complex of ancient copper mines that call the edge their home. It's clear that people have been present on the edge for thousands of years, be them bronze age tribesmen or Roman miners, and as with all ancient locations that have such strong continuity with the communities that surround them, it is only natural that strange stories and folklore will find ample opportunity to take flight.

In the case of Alderley Edge, that loric heritage is made easily apparent by simply driving around the local area and in that most noble of pursuits, noting the names of the public houses. On Wilmslow Road, there is The Merlin. On Macclesfield Road, The Wizard; and both are direct references to the area's most indelible and enduring legend, and one that I believe is intrinsically bound to prehistory of the edge itself.

The story of the "Wizard of The Edge" is known to have distant roots in the local lore of the area, but appears to have first appeared in print courtesy of the Manchester Mail in 1805, with the story being attributed to a Parson Shrigley, noted as a former "Clerk and Curate" of Alderley parish. In the tale, a farmer from the nearby village of Mobberley is taking a white mare to sell at Macclesfield market. His route takes him along the way of "the edge" where, at a spot known as Thieves Hole, an old haggard man in flowing clothing stops him.

The old man offers to buy the mare there and then, but the farmer refuses to sell, saying that he is sure to get a better price at the market. The old man, confident that the farmer will not be able to sell for a better price, states that he will be waiting in the same spot after the market closes, should the farmer change his mind. As the old man had intimated, the farmer goes to market only to find he cannot source a buyer for the mare. Meeting again that night as the farmer makes his return journey, they begin to discuss a price, before the old man, assuring him that it will be worth his while, leads the farmer and mare away to an area on the edge where - courtesy of the old man's magic staff - he splits an opening in the rock to reveal a pair of iron gates.

As the gates open, the old man leads them forward again to reveal a group of knights in armour, sleeping inside the rock. Each man has his own white mare, bar one. The knights would awake, the old man says, when England falls into grave danger, and ride out to rescue the nation. The farmer, as you would, duly sells his mare in return receives a chest of gold in payment.

The legend itself is a classic motif of Arthurian lore - the story of the sleeping hero - and is found throughout Britain in various forms. My relaying of it here - as some readers may have noted - is deliberately sparse, as whilst many historians and folklorists

across the years have dissected the legend's finer details in relation to Arthurian tradition, for me, this angle does little to help our exploration of the direct attachment between the landscape and the figure of the wizard.

Rather, my belief is that the legend is merely the ghost of a folk memory; the folk memory of a time in which the figure of the wizard was a very real concern of both the landscape and the treasure it contained within.

Alchemy of a Landscape

The narrative of the Alderley legend may be a regional spoke of a well honed national Arthurian wheel but within its retelling are important clues to the more obscure corners of the regions past. To meaningfully place the figure of the wizards within this past, it is vital to consider the history of the landscape itself; of which the sheer scale of the Alderley Edge copper mines is the predominant focus.

We're talking about a complex comprising at least 3 km of tunnelling from the pre-Roman period. A truly industrial enterprise, from which the Alderley copper would be added to tin to make one of the most important and highly valued prehistoric materials; bronze. Clearly, the running of such an industrious endeavour would take some serious organisation. Not only at the front end, where there would be a constant requirement for skilled labour, but of course, there was only any real use in mining copper ore if you actually had the ability to trade it; and a venture of Alderley's proportions is set up to trade on an international scale.

The Alderley Edge copper mine complex was a centre of major industry for the prehistoric North West - the significance of which is compounded further still when we note that the site that is regarded as the largest pre-historic copper mining complex in the world is located just 80 miles to the west of the edge at the Great Orme. But whilst such industry and enterprise may be the key to successful prehistoric economies, for most living within pre-historic communities, the practical worth of the riches, power and distinction that such a proposition as the copper mines could afford its custodians would have been, for the most part, irrelevant. For them, their primary thoughts around the complex, beyond the labour involved, would be far more supernaturally inclined. I mean, just how do you take a piece of rock and transform it into a solid, high value glittering object? How can that concept, without the benefit of scientific explanation, even really begin to be grasped? Mineral extraction, ore smelting, the mixing of chemical compound, the creation of liquid fire...well, what more natural, or even logical,

explanation could there be, than that of magic.

Alchemic pursuit - the ability to transform base materials into desirable objects - is a worldwide proto-science that in some ways has never really gone away. At its most extreme edges, its ambitions are limitless; a view perhaps best shared through noting the attempts throughout history to create something akin to an elixir of immortality.

However, by far its most common goal has undoubtedly been that of the endeavour to create gold, from scratch. The creation of bronze from minerals in the rock of the edge therefore is surely something of a prehistoric forerunner of the magical perception the process of alchemy naturally encourages. That this scientific magic should exist around such places as the copper mines is far from coincidental. In fact, it is inseparable from the mine itself. There was only one group within Iron Age society that had the ability to organise the mining and trade of such vast quantities of copper ore - and they are the same lone group that had the knowledge of alchemy; the Druids.

That the wizard of the edge is a folk memory of a druidic character associated with both the business and magic of the copper mines makes practical sense. The Druids were not just the governors of Iron Age society, they were the adjudicators, the lawmakers, the priests, and perhaps most importantly in relation to the copper mines, to directly quote Roman writer Pliny the Elder, natural scientists.

The image of the wizard in the legend therefore, presenting gold and riches stored beneath the earth of the edge, is likely to be a ghost of folk memory in action. That the farmer's payment was a reference to the treasure that existed within the edge may be considered a relatively clear aspect as a result, but the implication of copper and bronze as a frame of reference for such treasure is not all we have to cement this theory; for gold itself is also something of feature when it comes to ancient Alderley Edge.

The Golden Axe Mystery

It began with a discovery made by a man with a metal detector along Artists Lane in 1993. A gold ingot, pressed into the distinctive shape of an axe-head and subsequently subjected to inquest, asked questions of experts that still remain unanswered today. Reports were made by both John Cheery of the British Museum and the Adrian Tindall, the Principal Conservation Officer for Cheshire County Council, but neither could assert to which period of history the ingot belonged. Strange markings reminiscent of chevrons and clovers marked the find out as acutely unique.

They were pretty sure the gold wasn't medieval, but then never before had prehistoric

bullion been found with such insignia...it must have been a “one off”...an anomaly; an inconvenient curiosity to be best left forgotten save it throwing off all manner of wider historical theories. But no, incredibly, as a direct result of the mini-media frenzy that followed, five more gold bars were soon found on the edge, each again shaped as an axe-head and each again complete with the historically alien markings and insignia. The following extract from the Stockport Metro illustrates well the mystery of the first axe-head ingot’s discovery;

A small axe-shaped ingot found nearby Alderley Edge by a man using a metal detector remained a complete mystery at an inquest when a jury ruled it was not treasure trove... efforts are to continue by museums to try and identify the axe, which was said to be made mostly of gold with a sliver and copper content...Mr Hibbert was told the axe had been decorated with punch marks of a type not previously seen on prehistoric gold objects nor was there anything to suppose it was medieval. Archaeology at Manchester Museum said it had been closely examined but could not be identified as belonging to any particular culture.

The original axe known as Bar 1 was found as described at Artists Lane, Bar 2 and Bar 5 were then found beneath the very aptly named Golden Stone on the edge, whilst Bar 3 was found at the side of the waterfall in waterfall woods; Bar 4 was in fact found much earlier (1961) again at Artists Lane but its discovery was not made public until the publicity of the 1990s. One can only wonder how many more have been found only to be hidden away by private hands.

The golden axe-heads of Alderley Edge present a mystery quite unlike any other in British archaeology, but when placed into the context of the landscape they were found within, the mind begins to boggle. Ultimately, we can view the association of the wizard with the edge through an umber of prisms, and it may well be the case that each is valid in its own way. But when we remove ourselves from the vantage point of fantasy and consider the real historical implications of the story - and the archeology of the location - a very real picture begins to emerge.

Here we have a landscape dominated by the industry of copper mining over a period of several thousand years, the heyday of which was undoubtedly overseen by the druidic

order that presided over so many aspects of proto-British life before the Roman invasion. It is a period that has left a legacy in the earth, not only of copper ore and its alchemistic connotations, but quite possibly gold too. The size of the ingots discovered across the edge are as suggestive of a ritualistic use as much as they clearly a convenient means for storing wealth.

Alderley Edge is today known as a key part of Cheshire's wealthy Golden Triangle - but it may well be the case that the legend of the farmer's mare suggests this is nothing new at all. Much like the legend of Merlin and Stonehenge, sometimes our folklore calls us back to remember events that far more than pure myth. Sometimes, that folklore really is the custodian of a long forgotten history.

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