

THE INCREDIBLE HISTORY OF GOD'S TRUE CHURCH - (4)

By

Ivor C. Fletcher, England

CHAPTER FOUR - THE GLASTONBURY STORY

THERE can be few places in the whole of Britain so steeped in folklore, superstition and mystery as the little town of Glastonbury, tucked away in the heart of rural Somerset.

A place of pilgrimage for thousands even in this scientific age of the late twentieth century, a strange magnetic attraction seems to draw people to this spot, be they Christian, mystic, or wandering tourist.

Through the centuries some have regarded Glastonbury was none other than the fabled "Avalon" of antiquity, the "many-towered Camelot" where King Arthur and his beautiful Queen Guinevere held court.

Although many modern writers regard the story of Joseph of Arimathea coming to Glastonbury as mere pious fables fabricated by the local monks, some of the most eminent early authorities consider this in an entirely different light.

According to Archbishop Ussher:

"The Mother Church of the British Isles is the Church in Insula Avallonia, called by the Saxons -Glaston."

Sir Henry Spelman in his *Concilia* writes:

"It is certain that Britain received the Faith in the first age from the first sowers of the Word. Of all the churches whose origin I have investigated in Britain, the Church of Glastonbury is the most ancient."

Fuller, in his evaluation of the testimony of early writers on subject, states

"If credit be given to ancient authors, this Church of Glastonbury is the senior church of the world."

It should be mentioned that Fuller, in this context, was talking of the church building known as *"the old church"* made of wattle and daub, that survived until destroyed by fire in 1184.

Although Christian converts met together at Jerusalem and elsewhere in Palestine from an earlier date than that given for the construction of the wattle church at Glastonbury, these meetings took place in private houses or the synagogue.

If the construction of the wattle church was begun in the last year of the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius (A.D. 36-37), as ancient writers claim, then it would indeed be *"the first above-ground church in the world."*

The fact that the story of Joseph at Glastonbury was regarded as historical fact from the earliest times is evident by the enormous importance and prestige that the Abbey attracted.

The Abbey was built on the site of the wattle church but bore no resemblance in size or design to the earlier structure which measured 60 ft. by 26 ft.

The *"old church"* was sometimes also called the *"church of boughs,"* by virtue of its construction, which was of timber pillars and framework doubly wattled inside and out with clay, and thatched with straw.

It was probably more than coincidence that the measurements of the church agreed almost exactly with those of the Tabernacle erected by Moses in the wilderness. Christianity was brought to Britain by men of Hebrew rather than Roman extraction.

The Catholic writer Robert Parsons in his *"Three Conversions of England"* admits, as do many other early Catholic writers, that:

"It seems nearest the truth that the British Church was originally planted by Grecian teachers, such as came from the East, and not by Romans."(1)

The fact that for centuries the British churches followed Eastern rather than Roman usages confirms this point. Even as late as the time of Augustine the British bishops were reluctant to change the customs which they had received from the churches in Asia. When confronted with demands brought by Augustine from the Pope, they replied:

"We cannot depart from our ancient customs without the consent and leave of our people."(2)

In a book published by William Camden in 1674 we read:

"The true Christian Religion was planted here most anciently by Joseph of Arimathea, Simon Zelotes, Aristobulous, by St. Peter and St. Paul, as may be proved by Dorotheus, Theodoretus and Sophronius."(3)

The fact that many other historians shared this view is evident by noting the comment of Stillingfleet that:

"It is the opinion generally received among our later writers, as one of them tells the world, 'That the conversion of the British nation to the Christian faith was performed towards the latter end of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,' i.e. about thirty seven years after Christ's nativity."(4)

The same writer mentioned the general view of British church historians concerning the Glastonbury story:

"Who took it for granted, and believed that it is grounded on the testimony of ancient records."

Why, it might be asked, in the light of such records, do modern authorities relegate the story of Glastonbury to the realm of "*pious fables*" having little if any historical validity?

One reason is that few such "*ancient records*" are still extant. For centuries the church library at Glastonbury housed what was probably the finest collection of material on church history in Britain. This unique collection of rare documents was totally consumed by the fire of 1184. As this was the era of handwritten books and documents, prior to the invention of printing, it is probable that in many cases only single copies existed and thus vital evidence was destroyed.

There is some evidence to suggest that the monks, in order to raise funds for the rebuilding of their Abbey, attempted to reproduce some of these documents from memory; passing them off to the gullible pilgrims as the ancient originals.

It is likely that the monks, many of whom were poorly educated, had only a hazy understanding of the exact content of much of the material which they were reproducing, or as some would put it, "*forging*."

An example of this is "*St.Patrick's Charter*." Although Patrick could well have visited the Glastonbury church in the mid fifth century, the charter which bears his name was very clearly written some seven to eight centuries after his death.

The language and terminology used in the charter is beyond doubt mediaeval. Indulgences are also mentioned which were not used in the context of the charter until the eleventh century.

In spite of the fact that so much mediaeval superstition has clouded the true history of the Glastonbury church, it would be simply untrue to claim that no genuine records of great antiquity existed prior to the fire of 1184.

William of Malmesbury, possibly the leading historian of his day, visited Glastonbury in about 1125 and after examining the early records, mentions his findings:

"Since this is the point at which I must bring in the monastery of Glastonbury, let me trace from its very beginning the rise and progress of that church so far as I can discover it from the mass of source material."

Concluding his evidence of a second century work in the area he continues the narrative:

"As a result, missionaries sent by Eleutherius came to Britain, whose labours will bear fruit for evermore, even though the rust of ages has eroded their names. These men built the ancient church of St. Mary of Glastonbury, as faithful tradition has handed the story down through decaying time.

However, there are documents of no meagre credit, which have been found in certain places, saying thus:

'No other hands than those of the disciples of Christ erected the church of Glastonbury.'

Nor is this totally irreconcilable with truth, for if the Apostle Philip did preach to the Gauls (as Freulfus says in the fourth chapter of his second book), then it is possible to believe that he broadcast the seed of the Word across the sea also."⁽⁵⁾

For a hundred years and more after William wrote this, various "revised" versions of his work were produced by the monks.

Five years after the fire, which destroyed the old church and all the later buildings in the vicinity, Richard I came to the throne and all available funds were diverted to his crusade. The monks, in common with advertising men in later ages, decided to add colour to the product that William had provided.

The scholarly though cautious work of William needed something extra that would appeal to the superstitious pilgrims and visitors, and induce them to donate generously to the ambitious new building project.

To his simple statement that the Glastonbury church was "*the first church in the kingdom of Britain, and the source and fountain of all religion,*" the monks added miracles, visions and a personal visit by no less a personage than the angel Gabriel who instructed the builders of the old church to dedicate it to "*the Blessed Virgin.*"

In 1191 the monks proclaimed to an astonished nation that they had uncovered the remains of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere in the vicinity of the old church. Visitors flocked to Glastonbury and the building fund swelled -- the age of the Glastonbury legends had begun.

In their day the legends were more popular than many a Hollywood film epic of our present age. In time were added to the earlier story the "*Holy Grail*," the "*Holy Thorn*" and the thrilling adventures of Arthur's Knights of the Round Table.

To come to a more realistic study of the subject one needs to go back beyond the time of William of Malmesbury and look at the known history of the area.

The fact that "*the old church*" did indeed exist is clear historical fact and no fable. Direct references to this building, many made by writers who visited and examined the structure, are numerous.

There is also clear evidence that the building was erected in antiquity and was pre-Saxon in construction.

Even a writer who was unconvinced of its association with the first century church admitted that:

"I do not, then, deny that there was an ancient church before Ina's time, which after the Western Saxons became Christians, grew into mighty reputation"(6)

The Domesday Book, published in 1088, from existing Saxon records provides the information that:

"The Domus Dei, in the great monastery of Glastonbury, called the secret of the Lord. This Glastonbury church possesses, in its own villa, twelve hides of land which have never paid tax."

The land grant, according to tradition, was made by the local ruler to Joseph of Arimathea and his companions. Further grants of land were made to the church by Saxon kings. The exact extent of a "hide" of land is now unknown but is thought to have represented a plot of land sufficient to support one family.

This grant was obviously made at a very early period, as it is clear that even in 1088 the exact circumstances relating to the grant were no longer known.

By the time of the Saxon king Ina, who erected a church building of stone near the wattle church in 725 A.D., the earlier structure had already become "*a thing of untouchable mystery and holiness.*"

One of the reasons for the superstitious awe that surrounded the old church was that during the Dark Ages, prior to the conversion of the Saxons to the Catholic faith, the Glastonbury church was one of the very few, perhaps even the only church building, to survive from the Roman period.

A belief developed that the church was under some form of divine protection, and the history of the period would seem to bear this out. Time and again the violent tide of war seemed about to engulf the wattle church but always it came through intact.

In 577 A.D. the invading Saxons reached Glastonbury after looting and slaughtering their way across England. Within sight of the Tor, however, they halted, for some unknown reason, and the old church was preserved.

In 658 A.D. the church was the location chosen for the signing of a peace treaty between the Britons and Saxons. "*Here, for the first time, the English treated the Britons with respect as potential members of a larger fraternity,*" commented the historian Robinson.

The Danes attacked Glastonbury in 878 A.D. They set fire to several of the later buildings which surrounded the old church but the ancient wattle structure escaped unscathed.

Great stress was placed on the preservation of the original fabric of the building. In 630 A.D. the entire structure was encased in lead.

About a hundred years before this a pillar was erected bearing a brass tablet, the purpose being to define the exact limits of the church. As several other buildings had been erected over the years in the vicinity of the church this precaution was taken in order to prevent future possible confusion.

The pillar survived for about a thousand years -- its base was discovered in 1921. The brass tablet bore the inscription: "*The first ground of God, the first ground of the saints in Britain, and the burial place of the Saints.*" (7)

Traces of monastic buildings and military encampments have been discovered in the vicinity of Glastonbury dating to the "*Dark Ages*" period, following the withdrawal of the Roman legions from Britain in 410 A.D.

St. Patrick is said to have established the first monastic community in the area and to have been buried there in 472 A.D. The location of his burial is given in one work as "*by the right side of the altar in the old church.*"

Other authorities, as one might have expected, deny this and claim that he was buried in Ireland. Regardless of the identification of the personalities involved, the evidence of archaeology is that a community of Irish monks did settle in the area either during or shortly after the lifetime of Patrick.

Fragments of the buildings erected during this period may be inspected at the museum which has been set up near the site of the old church. It should be noted that the monks never claimed to have erected the old church, indeed the presence of this structure seems to have been the primary reason for their settlement in this area.

The monks, in addition to erecting several buildings of their own, seem to have carried out some restoration work on the old church. The first Saxons to reach the area reported that by their day the church was in a state of decay, patched up with boards and having a lead roof, replacing the earlier thatch. Four windows had also been made in the side and end of the building.

William of Malmesbury makes it clear in his *A Life of St. Dunstan* that

"Glastonbury had already passed under ecclesiastical authority long before the time of St. Patrick, who had died in A. D. 472."

In 1966, excavations carried out at Cadbury Castle and the nearby Glastonbury Tor established the existence of the "*historical Arthur*" or an "*Arthur type figure.*" The former site seems to have been his base camp and the latter a military look-out post.

The real or historic Arthur was a far cry indeed from the King Arthur of mediaeval legend. Recent evidence indicates that the Glastonbury Arthur (even this name is by no means clearly established) was a local Romano-British warrior king, or even a country gentleman turned soldier, who led his forces against the invading Saxons.

Several of the final last-ditch battles of the Britons against the Saxons took place in Somerset. The evidence of recent archaeological findings strongly point to Cadbury Castle as the headquarters of the real King Arthur.

Over the centuries the story of Arthur's desperate struggles with his enemies developed into a make-believe fantasy world of intrepid knights engaged in seemingly hopeless struggles against not only human military foes, but an impressive array of giants, monsters and wizards; a romantic world of knights in shining armour setting off to rescue beautiful damsels in distress.

The history of the Glastonbury church is almost a total blank during the third and fourth centuries -- the site could well have been abandoned during this period.

William of Malmesbury picks up the story again with the visit to Glastonbury of the second century bishops sent out by King Lucius. William believed that they were the builders of the wattle church.

Other sources, however, indicate that they did not build the church but merely carried out restoration work to an already existing structure.

"The church dedicated to St. Mary at Glastonbury repaired and raised out of the ruins by Faganus and Davianus, where they lived with twelve associates A.D. 187."(8)

Churches are also said to have been established by Lucius in London (AD. 179) Gloucester and Winchester (AD. 180) and Bangor, Dover and Canterbury.

Traces of buildings, thought to have been churches and dating from the Roman period, have been discovered at Dover and Canterbury.

Although some later writers have doubted the very existence of Lucius, the fact remains that for many centuries the establishment of churches at these sites during the second century was treated as historical fact. As the dates given for these churches are earlier than the visit of the bishops to Glastonbury, it is evident that the building work carried out there involved the restoration of an already existing structure.

There is no record that any of the second century British churches challenged the greater antiquity of the Glastonbury church.

There was a foreign challenge to this claim, however, and R.W. Morgan, the Victorian author, mentions the outcome of this:

"This priority of antiquity was only once questioned, and that on political grounds, by the ambassadors of France and Spain, at the Council of Pisa, A.D. 1417. The Council however, affirmed it."

A further Council at Sena reached the same decision:

"This decision laid down that the Churches of France and Spain were bound to give way in the points of antiquity and precedency to the Church of Britain, which was founded by Joseph of Arimathea immediately after the passion of Christ."(9)

Traces are found in the early records of a college or school that existed at Glastonbury during the first half of the second century for the training of ministers and others involved in preaching the gospel.

There can be little doubt that the work being done by these people, about which very little is known, was a small scale operation. As a noted archaeologist has recently pointed out, Christianity in Britain during the second century represented a "*minority sect.*"

The most noted scholar of the college, and indeed the only one of whom any record has survived was Elvanus Avalonius (Elvanus of Avalon or Glastonbury). He was also known as Elfan in Welsh sources.

"Bale saith that Elvanus Avalonius was a disciple to those who were the disciples of the Apostles, and that he preached the Gospel in Britain with good success"*(10)*

It is significant that Glastonbury seems to have been the headquarters, within a generation or two of the Apostolic age of "*the disciples of the Apostles.*"

Welsh authorities mention that Elfan presided over a congregation of Christians at Glastonbury. This, one would assume, must have taken place after the generation that had known the Apostles had died out.

The Book of Llandaff records that Elfan was appointed second Bishop of London in A.D. 185. About this time he wrote a book on the origin of the British church.

One of the "*disciples of the Apostles*" may have been Aristobulus (**Romans 16:10**). According to Cressy:

"St. Aristobulus, a disciple of St. Peter or St. Paul in Rome, was sent as an Apostle to the Britons, and was the first Bishop in Britain, he died in Glastonbury, AD. 99."

The *Greek Martyrologies* mention that:

"Aristobulus was one of the seventy disciples, and a follower of St. Paul the Apostle, along with whom he preached the Gospel to the whole world, and ministered to him. He was chosen by St. Paul to be the missionary bishop to the land of Britain inhabited by a very warlike and fierce race. By them he was often scourged, and repeatedly dragged as a criminal through their towns, yet he converted many of them to Christianity. He was there martyred, after he had built churches and ordained deacons and priests for the island."

The style of building and method of construction employed by the builders of the Glastonbury church reflects the general building styles used in Britain during the first century of the Christian era; this is particularly true of buildings erected prior to the Roman invasion of A.D. 43.

The church had little if anything to distinguish it from other buildings of the period used as public meeting places. Architecture of a distinctly ecclesiastical style is not known to have existed earlier than the third or fourth centuries.

"There is no clear example of a separate building set apart for Christian worship within the limits of the Roman Empire before the third century," wrote Lightfoot.

Churches erected by Constantine in the early fourth century and later were said to have been styled after the plain basilical halls of pagan antiquity. As early as the second century anti-Jewish feeling within the professing Christian church had become so intense that it is unlikely that a church building such as the one erected at Glastonbury could have been permitted, whose measurements coincided with those of the Hebrew tabernacle set up by Moses.

The Glastonbury church lacked even a baptistry, at its original construction, although this feature was one of the earliest to find its way into church architecture. It seems probable that the first converts were baptized in a local river or other natural water source.

This building, in common with other very early churches, faced towards the west. The builders could well have had in mind the strong warning given in **Ezekiel 8: 16** against pagan worshippers carrying out their devotions with *"their faces toward the east."*

In 1957-8 the remains of a wattle and daub structure with thatched roof, similar in construction to the Glastonbury church, was discovered near the site of the Roman town of Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester) in Hampshire. It has been dated to A.D. 25-43, the same period given by ancient writers for the construction of the church.

Since the Second World War, excavators have uncovered the remains of much of the first stages of construction of the Roman City of London dating from the time of the destruction of the city by Boadicea in A.D. 61. Evidence has come to light that most of the buildings from the period were of daub and wattle construction. The clear indications from this and other Roman sites are that stone buildings of Roman building styles began to rapidly replace the earlier daub; and wattle structures during the second century. By the latter part of this century few buildings of the earlier type were being erected.

Fuller, in his *Church History of Britain*, mentions the Glastonbury church as a place *"where at one view, we may behold the simplicity of primitive devotion, and the native fashion of British buildings in that age, and some hundred years after, it had a thatched covering."*

During the sixth and seventh centuries the native Britons, along with the incoming Saxons, no longer having the advanced building techniques of the Romans available to them, reverted to wattle and daub construction methods. There can be little doubt, however, that the erection of the Glastonbury church took place during the earlier period. By the second phase of this style of building the church was already surrounded by mystery and superstitious awe, and was of such great antiquity that major restoration work was required to preserve the original fabric of the structure.

Moving on to non-British sources, we are able to pick up the story of Joseph in the Ecclesiastical Annals of the sixteenth century Vatican librarian, Cardinal Baronius. A historian of great integrity, Baronius relates how he discovered a document of considerable antiquity in the Vatican archives. The manuscript related that in the year A.D. 35 a group of Christians including Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, Martha, Joseph of Arimathea, and several others were cast adrift in a boat from the coast of the Holy Land by persecuting Jews.

"In that year the party mentioned was exposed to the sea in a vessel without sails or oars. The vessel drifted finally to Marseilles and they were saved. From Marseilles Joseph and his company passed into Britain and after preaching the Gospel there, died."

According to the *Recognitions of Clement*, which is thought to have been written about A.D. 150-200, the group lived for a time at Caesarea prior to their voyage. This work has been described as a "kind of religious novel" containing a vast amount of theological speculation. Much of the historical framework in which it is set, however, bears a close relationship to known facts of the period.

Caesarea was the major port in Palestine. It was a cosmopolitan city and a home for many foreign seamen and merchants. As such, a much greater measure of religious freedom existed there than at Jerusalem. It would have proved an ideal place of temporary refuge for those fleeing from the persecutions recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. (11)

It is recorded in **Acts 11:19** that many Christians were driven by persecution into Phoenicia. Caesarea lies on the route between Jerusalem and Phoenicia. As the city is mentioned several times in the book of **Acts** the indications are that a Christian community of some size existed there.

This city was also the home of Philip the evangelist (**Acts 21:8**), a man closely associated with Joseph in the early records. According to tradition he was the man who ordained Joseph and supervised much of his later work.

According to Isidorus Hispalensis, this Philip who was formerly "one of the seven deacons" carried the Gospel first to the Samaritans and later to Gaul (France) (12)

Elsewhere he states:

"St. Philip preached to the Gauls, and persuaded the neighbouring and savage tribes on the borders of the ocean to the light of knowledge and of faith."(13)

No trace of Joseph in Palestine is found after about A.D. 35, no record of any martyrdom and no reference to his movements outside of the areas of Britain and France. The information given by Baronius relating to the enforced voyage to Marseilles of Joseph and his companions seems the most likely and logical account of his movements.

A great many local traditions have been handed down in the Marseilles area relating to the arrival and later work of Joseph and his companions. It is a clear

historical fact that Southern France was one of the first areas in the west to receive the gospel message.

It was here that some of the earliest and most severe persecutions took place.

The earliest records relate a simple narrative rather similar in style to that of the book of **Acts**, stories of incredible miracles associated with the group seem to have been added at a later date.

One local tradition mentions the boat drifting to the coast of Provence, and after following the Rhone, arriving at Arles. The first Jewish settlers in the area are said to have *"come in a boat which had been deserted by its captain."*

A Spanish version of the story leaves the group in Aquitaine *"as the histories of the Gauls and the local traditions plainly teach."*

Several of the Rhone Valley churches traced their origins back to Lazarus and other fellow travelers of Joseph. In the annals of the mediaeval writer Roger de Horedon we read:

"Marseilles is an episcopal city under the domination of the King of Arragon. Here are the relics of St. Lazarus, the brother of St. Mary Magdalene and Martha, who held the bishopric here for seven years after Jesus had restored him from the dead."

Recognized trade and military routes existed during the first century A.D. from Marseilles, across France to the Channel ports and from these into Britain. The Emperor Claudius for example traveled from Marseilles to Boulogne and from there to Colchester in Britain, returning by the same route to Rome.

Traces of Joseph of Arimathea are found in the local traditions of Limoges and Morlaix, both located on the trade route to Britain. The first bishop of Treginer is said to have been Drennalus, a disciple of Joseph. It is significant that even critics of the Glastonbury legends admit that Christianity came into Somerset *"via Brittany."*

One objection that has been raised to the point of Joseph arriving in Britain as early as the last year of the reign of Tiberius (a mere five to six years after the crucifixion of Christ) is that Eusebius records an ancient tradition *"that our Saviour commanded his Apostles not to depart from Jerusalem within twelve years after his ascension."*

Even if this tradition reflected an accurate point of historical fact, as it could well have done, the evidence is considerable that the instructions applied to the Apostles -- and only the Apostles.

Other members of the church driven by persecution traveled to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (**Acts 11:19**). The restrictions put on the movements of the Apostles do not appear to have applied to the church in general, nor on the activities of Joseph of Arimathea.

Some have mentioned that the Christian message, at this early period, was taken only to the Jews, or as Rabanus, the eighth century writer, puts it, to *"the twelve tribes of the Hebrews."*

The West of England about this time, however, supported many who were of Hebrew or Eastern Mediterranean extraction. Several artifacts have been discovered in Somerset which originated in the same area.

Many involved in the Cornish mining operations had a Jewish background. "The Jews appear to have called themselves or were called by the Britons of Cornwall 'Saracens.'"(14)

Joseph, if he restricted his preaching to those of his own race, would have found many of his fellow countrymen trading in the West of England.

Archbishop Ussher records that:

"from Juvenal indeed it appears that Arviragus became king of the Britons while Domitian was Emperor, since our Joseph is said to have died under Vespasian in the year 76."

Cressy in his *Church History of Brittany* writes:

"Joseph was buried near the little wattle church he built. The lid of the sarcophagus said to have contained his remains bore the simple inscription:

"To the Britons I came after I buried the Christ. I taught, I have entered my rest."

John Bloom of London, conducting excavations under a license granted by Edward the Third, claimed to have discovered Joseph's body at Glastonbury in 1345.

The point made by Bishop Godwin in his *Catalogue of Bishops* seems to adequately sum up the story of Joseph:

"The testimonies of Joseph of Arimathea's coming here are so many, so clear, and so pregnant, as an indifferent man cannot but discern there is something in it."

FOOTNOTES - Chapter 4

- (1). Vol. 1, page 15.
- (2). *Ecclesiastical History of England by Bede.*
- (3). *Remains of Britain, page 5.*
- (4). *Antiquities of the British Churches, page 1.*
- (5). *De Gestis Regum Angliae, second edition.*
- (6). *Antiquities of the British Churches, Stillingfleet.*
- (7). *Concilia, Sir Henry Spelman.*
- (8). *Antiquities of the British Churches, Stillingfleet.*
- (9). *St. Paul in Britain, KW Morgan, page 64.*
- (10). *Antiquities of the British Churches, Stillingfleet.*
- (11). *Greek Men., ad 15 March.*
- (12). *Isidorus Hispalensis, vol. vii, 392.*
- (13). *Vol. V, 184.*
- (14). *Polwhele's History of Cornwall.*

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