



SEARCHING FOR *Camelot*

Rugged, windswept and magical, the north Cornish coast is the perfect place to explore the legend of King Arthur

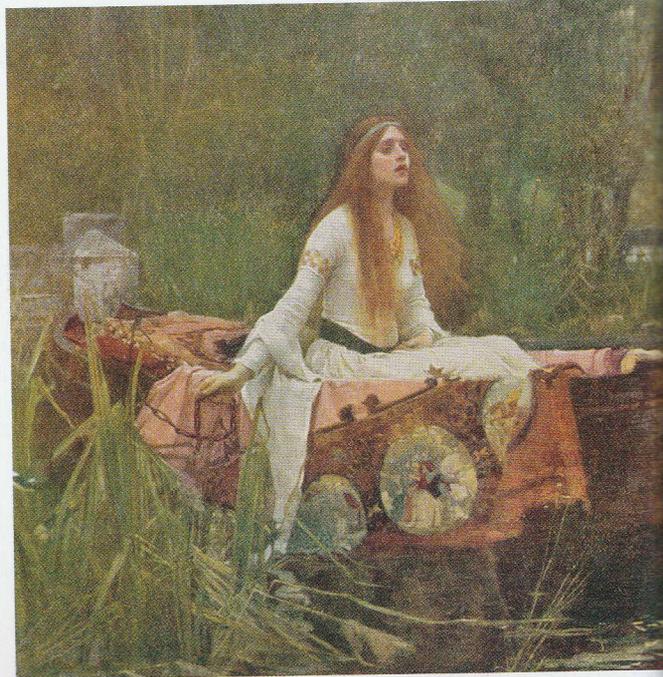
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The legends and myths of King Arthur swirl throughout Britain, with countless locations from Scotland to the far south west of England claiming connections to the fabled leader and his adventures. Few though can beat the drama and romance of Tintagel Castle, said to be the place of Arthur's magical conception. Set high on the rugged, windswept coast of North Cornwall, history and legend have become inextricably intertwined here, steeping the ancient site in a sense of mystery.

And Tintagel is just the starting point on the trail of Arthur in Cornwall. From the magnificent court of Camelot to the final, fatal battle with Mordred, some of the most famous tales about the king lead visitors on a journey through the county's atmospheric landscape.

Debate rumbles on as to whether King Arthur really existed or was a figure woven from many historical and mythological characters. According to medieval romances and histories, Arthur led the



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defence of Britain against Saxon invaders in the late 5th and early 6th centuries. Over time the figure developed as different authors recounted his story. The 12th-century writer Geoffrey of Monmouth was the first to outline King Arthur's life from beginning to end in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (or *The History of the Kings of England*), which had a huge impact at the time and helped popularise the Arthurian legend.

The 1136 book introduced many of the elements we are familiar with today, such as Arthur's father Uther Pendragon, his wife Guinevere, the wizard Merlin, and the sword Excalibur. It also named Tintagel as the place of Arthur's conception. Although Geoffrey of Monmouth's credentials as a historian are shaky to say the least, it is likely he drew on Tintagel's past as a seat of Cornish leaders when weaving his tales of Arthur.

The site was certainly an important stronghold during the Dark Ages and archaeological finds suggest that Tintagel was probably the residence

of 6th-century rulers of an ancient south-west British kingdom, known as Dumnonia. Cornish and Breton writers also linked Tintagel to the love story of Tristan and Isolde, which over time became part of the Arthurian legend.

Drawn by these powerful associations, Richard, Earl of Cornwall built a castle on the rocky headland in the 13th century. The cliff-top castle consisted of an outer bailey on the mainland and an inner ward with a great hall and chambers on the headland. It had no strategic value and before long had crumbled to ruins, but Tintagel's place in the folklore of King Arthur was secure, continuing to inspire writers and artists through the ages.

English Heritage owns the site today and there's plenty to explore, from the ruins of the Dark Ages and medieval settlements, to Merlin's Cave on the beach below. Thousands of people visit every summer alone and, in recent years, and investments have been made in enhancing the site. A dramatic new footbridge is due to be

Above, left to right: St Nectans Glen is said to be where the Knights of the Round Table were blessed; Tintagel Castle ruins

*Left: John William Waterhouse's 1888 painting, *The Lady of Shalott*, was inspired by a Tennyson poem of the same name, which drew on Arthurian legend*

Top: The waterfall at St Nectans Glen, which is place of spiritual significance

Bottom: The Gallos sculpture at Tintagel is inspired by the spot's royal heritage

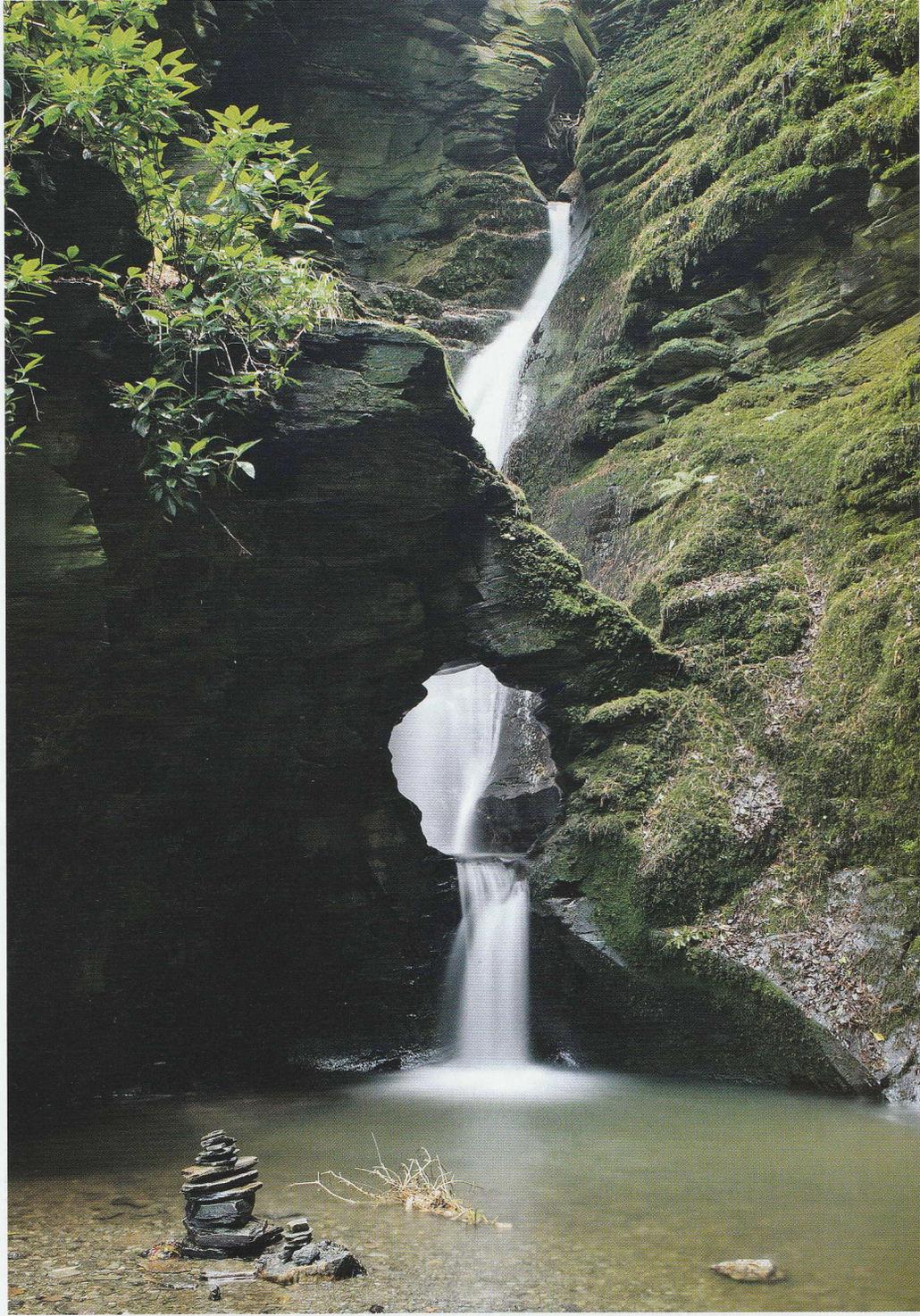
completed in 2019, while the charity recently unveiled a series of new features exploring Tintagel's history and the role that legends have played in shaping it. The centrepiece is *Gallos*, a larger-than-life bronze sculpture inspired by the royal figures associated with Tintagel, including Arthur himself. Elsewhere, a stone compass points to places across the British Isles connected to the Arthurian legend and a wizard's face has been carved into the rock near Merlin's Cave.

Not everyone is happy with the additions. Cornish historians have criticised the focus on Arthurian legend, reasoning that it turns Tintagel into a "fairy tale theme park" at the expense of the area's true significance as a major historical site. English Heritage, however, says the interpretation helps explain Tintagel's "unique story, where archaeology, history and legend are intertwined".

The Knights of the Round Table were blessed in St Nectans Glen waterfall before the quest for the Holy Grail

Whether fact, fiction or a tantalising tangle of the two, there's no doubt that the legend of King Arthur forms a considerable part of Tintagel's allure for many. And, if this rocky outcrop gave us King Arthur, it's no surprise that through the years visitors and locals have also traced his story elsewhere in the moors, rivers and towns of Cornwall. The famous Round Table, around which King Arthur and his knights congregated, is said to be buried less than a mile away, under Bossiney Mound.

The story goes that it will rise from the ground one midsummer's night, heralding the return of Arthur and his knights. A little further up the coast road is St Nectans Glen, an area of ancient woodland where a tranquil walk leads to a spectacular 60ft waterfall cascading through a hole in the slate 'kieve', or basin. It is said the Knights of the Round Table were blessed here before the quest for the Holy Grail. Saint Nectan is also believed to have built his hermitage above the waterfall in the 6th century and it has





Left: King Arthur asks the Lady of the Lake for the sword, Excalibur

Below: Merlin's face is carved into rock near the beach at Tintagel

become renowned as a spiritual and sacred site with numerous offerings of ribbons, crystals and other devotions left by visitors.

A few miles inland from Tintagel is Slaughterbridge, on the banks of the River Camel. Here a 6th-century inscribed stone is reputed to mark the spot where Arthur met his enemy, Mordred for the decisive Battle of Camlann. Known as 'King Arthur's Stone', it is now part of the Arthurian Centre, which offers visitors the opportunity to walk through the fields where the bloody battle supposedly took place, along with an exhibition exploring the legend. There are also activities for younger visitors and archaeological digs, including Lady Falmouth's Secret Garden and an 18th-century garden that was rediscovered in 2005 and is gradually being excavated.

While some claim Tintagel as the legendary site of the court of Camelot it has many rivals, including two in northern Cornwall. Just off the Atlantic Highway north of Wadebridge is Castle Killibury, or Kelly Rounds, an Iron Age fort. Welsh writings refer to Arthur having a court at Kelliwig in Kernow (or Cornwall), and some think that this was Killibury.

Continuing north, the A39 road – known as the Atlantic Highway – passes through Camelford, originally a medieval market town and an

