

On the trail of King Arthur

Step into Britain's landscape of legends this spring, to explore some of the many sites connected with King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table



TINTAGEL CASTLE, CORNWALL

Where better to start your adventure than at the atmospheric remains of Tintagel Castle, said to be the place where Arthur was conceived? Perched atop a promontory off the rugged Cornish coastline, surrounded by azure seas, the castle actually dates to the 13th Century – much later than the time King Arthur could have existed. However, excavations have also uncovered the foundations of a Dark-Age village and a large number of Mediterranean pottery fragments and other artefacts, suggesting it was an important stronghold and trading site from the 5th to 7th Centuries. Begin your visit at the exhibition to find out more about the history and legends of Tintagel – and before you leave, don't forget to climb down to the beach (provided the tide is low) to explore Merlin's Cave, through which the wizard is said to have carried baby Arthur to safety.

King Arthur is surely one of the most well-known and loved of all characters from British legend. Tales of his birth, royal court, knights and adventures have captured the imaginations of children and adults alike for centuries – and whether you believe him to be a figure of pure fiction or one rooted in fact, there's plenty of fun to be had in following his footsteps through the magical landscapes of England, Wales and Scotland.

King Arthur's name is linked with numerous sites across the UK, but here are 10 of the best to kick off your quest for 'the once and future king'...



DINAS EMRYS, GWYNEDD

The landscape of Snowdonia is rich in Arthurian legend. It's here that Arthur is said to have defeated the terrifying giant, Rhitta, who wore a cloak made from his enemies' beards. But, most importantly, it's the place where the prophecy of King Arthur began. As a small boy, the wizard Merlin was summoned to the hillfort of Dinas Emrys by King Vortigern, who couldn't understand why a tower he was building there kept falling down. Merlin told him that two dragons were fighting in a pool beneath the ground – the White Dragon of the Saxons was winning, but would soon be defeated by the British Red Dragon. Modern excavations have shown that the fortifications do in fact date to around the 5th Century, which was the time of Vortigern (though his existence is disputed), and they also seem to have been rebuilt several times!



BOSHERSTON LILY PONDS, PEMBROKESHIRE

The large ponds in the village of Bosherton may not have been created until the 18th Century, but that hasn't stopped Arthurian legends rising to the surface. The Lady of the Lake is reputed to have emerged from these waters to present King Arthur with his sword, Excalibur. Forming part of a National Nature Reserve, there's plenty of wildlife to see here all year round, but these flooded limestone valleys are particularly resplendent during the spring and summer months when otters play, dragonflies skim across the surface, and, in June and July, the famous water lilies flower. An easy walk of a mile or so will take you around the ponds, and open up further opportunities for exploring the beautiful Broadhaven beach and the dunes and pools of the Mere Pool Valley as well.



ARTHUR'S SEAT, LOTHIAN

Arthur's Seat is the main peak of a group of hills that tower above Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh, reaching a height of 251m above sea level. Its name has given rise to a reputation as the site of Camelot – King Arthur's legendary castle and court. But Edinburgh's historic name, Castellum Puellarum ('Castle of Women'), also seems to link the city with the Castle of Maidens, which features in several of the Arthurian tales.



ARTHUR'S STONE, HEREFORDSHIRE

On Merbach Hill, near Dorstone, sits Arthur's Stone – a Neolithic burial chamber built of huge stone slabs. Local folklore gives several different accounts as to how the monument got its name. Some say it's King Arthur's burial place, others that he fought a duel there and buried his rival under the stones. But the most popular story tells of his victory in a fight against a giant, whom he threw down onto one of the stones. Two hollows in the rock are said to be the impressions of the giant's elbows, made when he fell, or of Arthur's knees when he dropped to the ground to give thanks to God for his win. Soak up the atmosphere at this enigmatic site as you take in the sweeping views across Herefordshire's Golden Valley. ▶



CASTLESTEADS, CUMBRIA

The small Roman fort that once stood here, along Hadrian's Wall, is believed to have been called Camboglanna – a name that has been linked with Camlann, the site of King Arthur's last battle. Could this have been the spot where his legendary reign drew to a close? As anyone who has walked the Hadrian's Wall Path will attest, the landscape here can be unforgiving even to this day – but it's also an area steeped in both history and mystery that's well worth exploring.

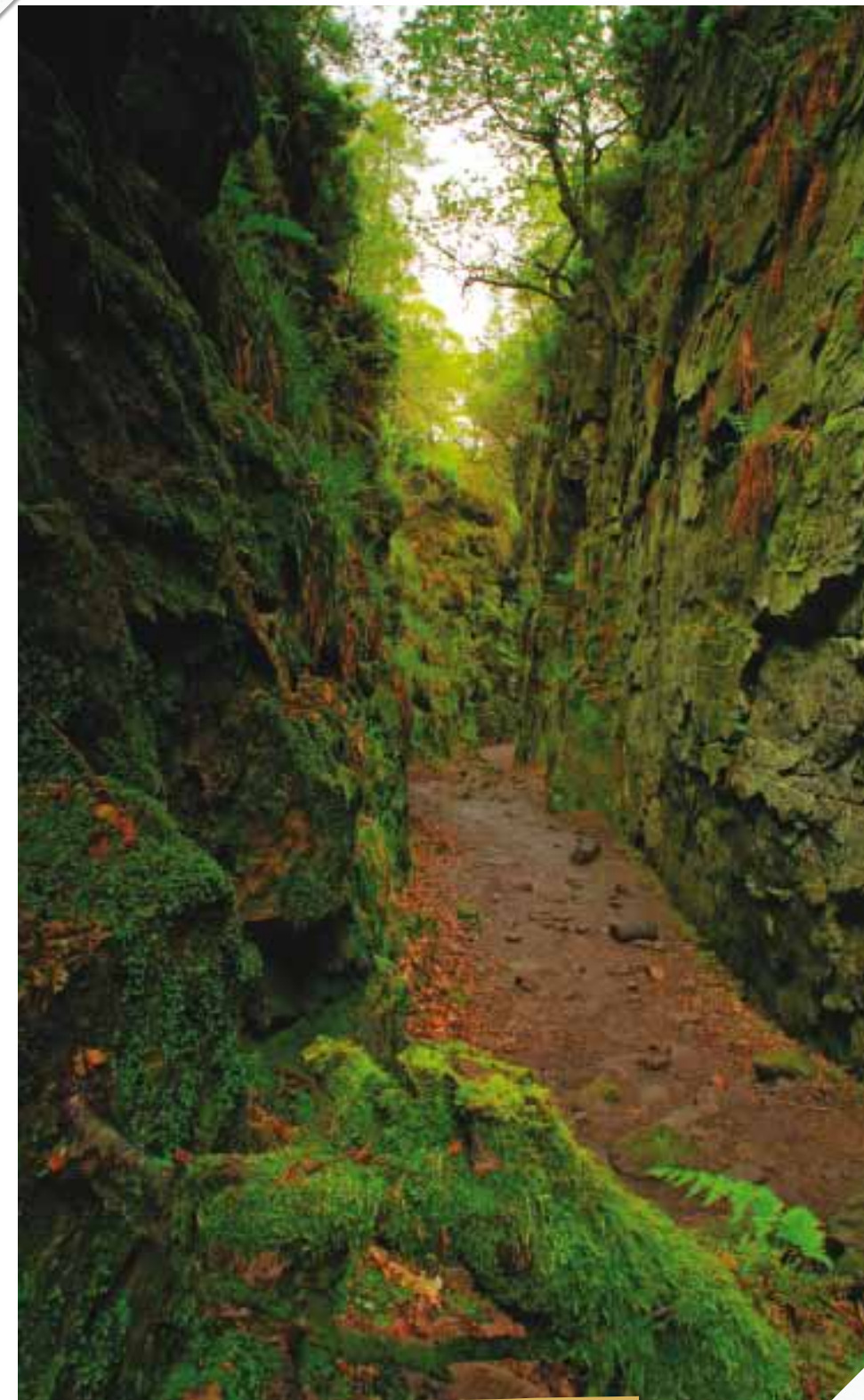
GLASTONBURY, SOMERSET

Glastonbury has long been associated with Avalon – the magical island to which King Arthur was carried on a barge after his last battle, to be healed of his wounds. The tradition dates back to at least the 12th Century, when monks at Glastonbury Abbey claimed to have uncovered the grave of King Arthur and his queen, Guinevere, in their grounds. You can still visit the grave site today, which is marked with a plaque. Interestingly, many experts believe that Glastonbury Tor was once surrounded by marshy water, which would indeed have turned it into an island. Try climbing to the top of this iconic hill, with St Michael's Tower at the summit, for panoramic views of the Somerset Levels, Dorset, Wiltshire and Wales.



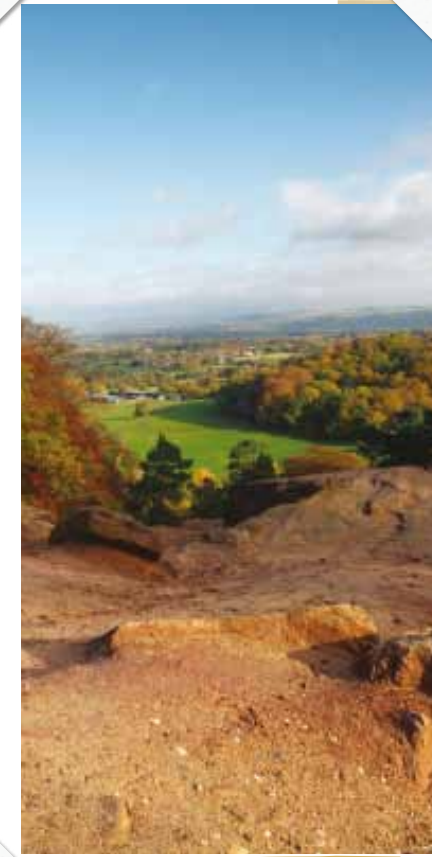
BAMBURGH CASTLE, NORTHUMBERLAND

This magnificent coastal castle was once the royal seat of the Kings of Northumbria, and is said to be one of two possible locations for Sir Lancelot's castle, Joyous Garde (the other being nearby Alnwick). Dating back to at least the 6th Century, Bamburgh is certainly old enough to be connected with Arthurian legend. Its former name of Din Guarie (or Guayrði) does sound rather similar to 'Garde', too. Today, you can explore the grounds, state rooms, keep, towers and gates of Bamburgh, and discover tales of ghosts, dragons, royal rebellions and bloody battles.



LUD'S CHURCH, STAFFORDSHIRE

This damp, mossy chasm in a wooded hillside on the southwest fringe of the Peak District National Park is believed to be the setting for the climax of a well-known Arthurian tale – Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The story originated as a late 14th-century poem, the author of which is unknown. It describes the fateful day that a huge green man, carrying an axe and a sprig of holly, rides boldly into King Arthur's court on his equally green horse, and invites a worthy opponent to take part in a 'Christmas game'. That person, the Green Knight says, may strike him with the axe, on the condition that he is able to return the blow in a year and a day's time, at a place called the Green Chapel. Arthur's nephew Gawain volunteers for the challenge and duly beheads the Green Knight with a single stroke, before watching in horror as he stands, picks up his head, remounts and rides away. As the months pass, it comes time for Gawain to embark on his journey to meet with the Green Knight once again, and to stay true to his word...



ALDERLEY EDGE, CHESHIRE

Several areas across the UK are linked with stories of Arthur and his knights laying in slumber, ready to rise again when the country is in greatest need. One such place is Alderley Edge – a red sandstone escarpment overlooking the Cheshire Plain. A local folktale recounts the strange experience of a farmer from nearby Mobberley, who was walking through the area on his way to Macclesfield to sell a white mare when he was approached by an old bearded man. The man asked to buy the mare and, when the farmer refused, he issued a warning that no other offer would be made to him that day. Sure enough, no one at the market would buy her, so the farmer headed home. The old man was still standing in exactly the same spot. This time he asked the farmer to follow him to a cleft in one of the rock faces, where iron gates swung open to reveal an army of sleeping warriors in the cave beyond – all but one with a white horse sleeping next to him. The old man explained that they were laying in wait for a terrible battle that would break out in England. The farmer took the purse of gold offered to him for the mare and hurried away, and the cave was never seen again. Was it Merlin he had encountered? Today you can explore the Wizard Walk trail, grab a bite to eat at The Wizard pub, and discover the nearby Devil's Grave cave, Wizard's Well spring, and 18th-century Druids' Stone Circle folly.