



# Castles and Storm Clouds on the Cornish Coast

*Story by Steve Melia*

**F**or over a thousand years, Cornwall has been ruled as part of England. However, as many Cornish people will tell you, they are not English - they are Celtic.

The origins of Cornwall's ambiguous status go back to a time between the departure of the Romans and the Norman conquest, from which few written records survive. Some recent archaeological finds are changing what we thought we knew about that era. To learn more, I set out on a walk along the Cornish coast, from Port Isaac to Bude, stopping first in Exeter, where the story begins with the arrival of the Romans.

The rail line to Cornwall passes through Exeter in the neighbouring county of Devon, regarded as a rival by many Cornish. It is a small city of 130,000 people, but it feels larger. Climbing the hill from the main station towards the centre, one is surrounded by history, some of it obvious, and some of it waiting to be discovered down the side streets and passageways. The Roman walls around the historic centre are still largely intact, although they have been repaired and rebuilt several times. If one looks closely, one can see the different styles from each era, with the Roman stonework at the bottom.

The Royal Albert Memorial Museum has a room devoted to local history and pre-history. In the Roman collection, some of the artworks look strangely naïve - a note beside one of them says "The artists who made these were not as skilled as their Italian counterparts." This was frontier country, and Exeter was the westernmost town in southern Britain, the capital of the Dumnonii administrative region. The name Dumnonii came from a local Iron Age Celtic tribe. The boundaries of their territory, and how far Roman rule stretched into Cornwall, remain uncertain. Archaeological finds suggest the Cornish population was less Romanized than their neighbours, but new evidence has emerged of Roman military sites and of a road network.

What happened after the Romans left is also shrouded in mystery. The museum showcases very little between the 5th and 9th



centuries, as little has been found. We know that Exeter was abandoned soon after the Romans left. There are a few historical references to a new Celtic-speaking kingdom called Dumnonia, but not much is known about it. Few documents survive from that time, but one important site I was planning to visit on the Cornish coast revealed more.

At 1,014 kms, the Southwest Coast Path is the longest long-distance footpath in Britain, and the landscape varies from grassy meadows to steep rocky cliffs. When the sun shines on a clear day there is nowhere else in the world I would rather be. I saw ravens, kestrels, buzzards, stonechats and many others. Butterflies are declining across most of Britain but there were plenty of them flying that day.

That stretch of the coast was steep,

rocky and slow going, and the 11km to lunch at Trebarwith Sands took me until mid-day. Tintagel Island was visible in the distance, gradually looming larger in the afternoon. I was planning to visit it the following day, but the UK Met Office had published a weather warning, so I took as many photos as I could. That proved a wise decision.

The island, which is managed by English Heritage, is attached to the mainland by two footbridges, one of them added in 2019. From different points on the coastal path, one can see the remains of a 13th Century castle. However, the places that really interested me were out of sight, on top of the island.

Excavations in the 1930s revealed the bases of rectangular stone buildings from post-Roman times. The archaeologists thought they had found a monastery, but later



Steve on Port Gaverne Beach

English Heritage's Curator for the West.

"We already knew that this was an important site," he explains via video, "But modern techniques now allow us to date things more precisely, and to trace where they came from. We only excavated an area the size of a tennis court, but it has confirmed that this was one of Britain's largest settlements after the Romans left. We have traced the sherds of pottery and fragments of glass back to Greece and Turkey and have now recovered more exotic pottery from Tintagel than the whole of the rest of Britain for that period."

Books and documentaries have described Tintagel as a centre of Dumnonian royalty.

"This was certainly an elite settlement, possibly a royal settlement, but we don't know if there were really kings as we imagine them today, or if they were more like leaders. The buildings are quite similar in size - there is no palace here, and no bones have survived, so we can't say for sure who these people were. We believe they were Cornish, but they could have come from elsewhere."

We talked for nearly two hours, and I began to realize how, even today, we cannot be sure how post-Roman society was organized. The documentaries, media reports - and even

excavations cast doubt on that. The most recent digs began in 2016, generating a flurry of media interest.

**“Tintagel is known worldwide for its connection to King Arthur.**

In the 12th century, Geoffrey of Monmouth named it as the place where Arthur was conceived with the help of Merlin the magician. That legendary connection might have persuaded Richard Earl of Cornwall to build his castle there. As I found in Bretagne, wherever King Arthur hung out, tourist kitsch soon followed. I climbed back up the main street, past businesses with names like King Arthur's Arms and Merlin's Cave Crystal and Gift Shop.

I had arranged to interview Win Scutt,



Crackington Haven

some of the history books - have overstated what we really know. The final report of the excavation will soon be online, and Win tells me it contains a few more surprises.

The following morning, I returned to the castle to find a sign saying: closed due to high winds. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised.

The storm had not yet arrived, so I walked down towards the beach. Merlin's cave, accessible from the beach at low tides only, runs underneath the island. A small sculpture, the face of Merlin, is carved into the rock nearby. Part of his nose has been chipped away - perhaps a random act of vandalism, fired by the same outrage which led some Cornish critics to attack English Heritage's 2016 presentation of the site as a "fairytale theme park".

The small interpretation centre mentions the legends and their possible influence on Earl Richard, but most of the display concerns the history of the site. It includes a few of the pottery fragments excavated there.

"There is a tradition of presenting historic sites in a dry information-giving way," shares Scutt. "We wanted to use public art to appeal to people's emotional intelligence, to create tactile elements, particularly for children; but the interpretation on the island is quite subtle - just a few small plinths with objects you can touch. It has been very successful."

There was one other place I wanted to visit before leaving Tintagel; King Arthur's Great Halls is unashamedly dedicated to the Arthurian legends. It was built in the 1920s behind a 19th Century stone house, where I met John, the curator, who told me, "Groups like to come here first, because we are the only place in Tintagel which tells the story of King Arthur."

In the first room behind the entrance, actor Robert Powell tells a shortened version of King Arthur's story. Following Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Arthur, the Celtic Romano-Briton, has become 'King of England', and in this version the English have travelled back in time to fight against the Saxons!

The main hall behind the house is a monument to the obsession of one man, a wealthy businessman from London called Thomas Glasscock.

"Pronounced Glass'ck" John corrects me.



Bude Storm Tower

**“The stained-glass windows around the hall are impressive; each one illustrates a different aspect of the Arthurian legends.”**

While I was inside the hall, the storm began. The coastal path can be slippery at the best of times and in storms it can be quite dangerous. I sheltered inside the entrance to a shop, waiting for a bus to take me the next 8

km to Boscastle.

In the National Trust café beside the river in Boscastle a sign tells of the flood of 2004. The highest water level reached the beams above my head. I remember watching a helicopter on the TV news, rescuing people from rooftops. 80 vehicles and 6 buildings were washed into the sea, but - amazingly - no one drowned.

During the night, the storm strengthened, and everything seemed to be rattling.



King Arthur's Great Halls



Excavations on Tintagel Island

The hostel where I was staying was partially destroyed in 2004. Thankfully, the rain subsided in the early hours of morning, though it was still somewhat blistery.

The path from the village to the coast climbs over rocks looking down over the harbour. A gale was still blowing. I came to a cliff edge where I thought: if I climb round there and slip, I will be fish food. So, I turned back, and found the official coast path, which had branched-off earlier.

Those 21 kms from Boscastle to Wide-mouth Bay are amongst the toughest of the whole the coastal path, climbing 1250 metres with steep descents in between. There were strange rock formations, some of them natural and others created by long-abandoned quarrying. It was scary at times, but also exhilarating.

The only food stop was halfway, at Crackington Haven, a combined Cornish and English name, which sits on an ancient lin-

guistic boundary. To the south of a line from there to the River Ottery there are Cornish placenames, like Tresparrett, Trevigue and Pencuke. To the north, they turn English, such as Coxford, Wainhouse and Jacobstow, a reminder of the next phase of Cornish history - the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons who settled that part of Cornwall.

Was this a peaceful or a violent process?

I asked historian Dr Oliver Padel, who told me, “There was a military conquest ending in 838, with the battle of Hingston; but there was also gradual settlement by farmers - they are the ones who changed placenames on the ground. There must have been some people already living there but they may have been sparsely scattered, so there might have been peaceful settlement as well as, perhaps, a certain amount of coercion.”

**“It would take another thousand years for English to replace Cornish across the whole of Cornwall.”**

As the last native-speakers aged in the 18th Century, antiquarians began recording their language, leaving a legacy for later revival movements.

Over the years I have watched the coastal path retreat inland in many places where rising seas have reclaimed the terrain. At the end of the walk in Bude, I stopped to photograph the town’s most famous structure: the octagonal Storm Tower. Built in the 1830s, it has been dismantled and moved inland twice, most recently in 2023. A painting in the Castle Museum shows the three different places where it has stood.

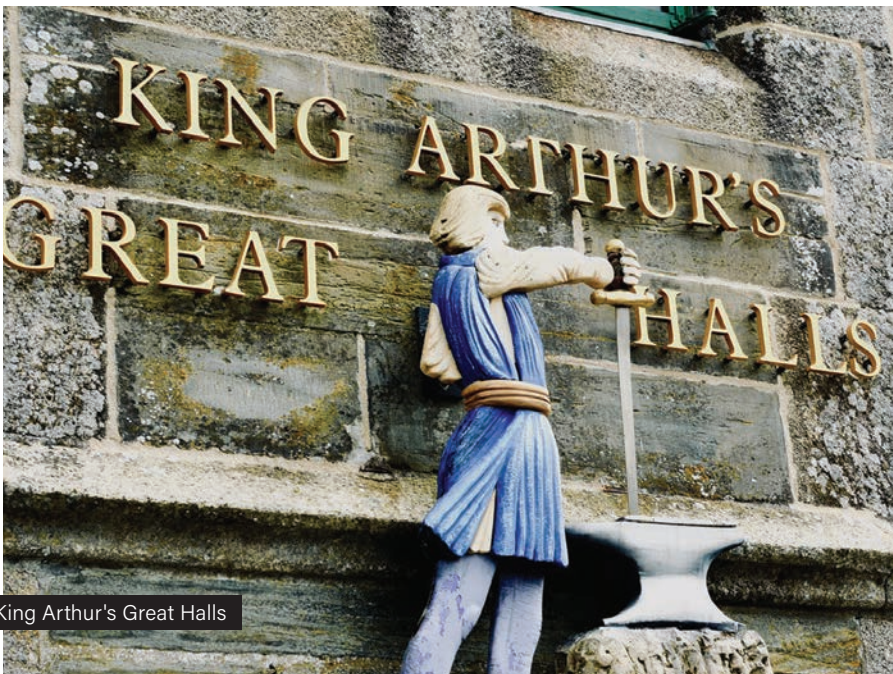
The museum is partly staffed by volunteers. One of them, Mike Bosworth, is an expert on the folk music of Cornwall and Devon, on which he produces a podcast.

I ask him if people in this part of Cornwall consider themselves to be English.

He thinks for a moment and replies: “That’s difficult to say. Most people here are like me - incomers.”

My return journey was easier: just one bus to the lovingly restored railway station on a reopened branch line in Okehampton, back in Devon.

“That’s typical,” said a woman I met in Bude. “They get something like that in Devon, but never here!”



King Arthur's Great Halls