

THE BATCOMBE TOKEN

by Peter Lewis

MY great grandfather, Louis Lewis, had been a schoolteacher in the village of Batcombe in Somerset before he migrated with his family to Queensland in 1882. Batcombe is only about ten miles from Glastonbury where there is a ruined abbey (Figure 1). It is said that the abbey church was built in 166 AD by missionaries from Rome. Glastonbury lies on the slopes of a hill that rises to a peak (tor) of 522 feet, and at the top is the stone tower of St Michael's church (Figure 2).

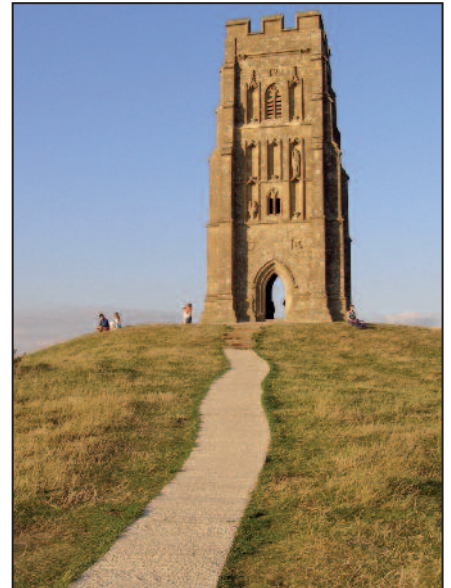
Because of my family connection I have taken an interest in Somerset, and being a nummatist I have become interested in the tokens that circulated there in the 17th century, when there was a shortage of coins. Only one token was ever issued in Batcombe. It is very rare today and I have never seen one, or even a picture of one. All I have is a description. On the obverse there is a stocking and the legend, STEPHEN PARSONS. HSIR. The last word is a contraction of HOSIER, indicating that Stephen was a dealer in stockings. On the reverse is the inscription, IN BATCOMBE SOMERSET S.I.P. The token was worth a farthing and issued during the period 1648-74. I have been trying to find one because I would like to donate it to the church in Batcombe where my grandfather was baptized. Despite years of

searching my quest for this 'Holy Grail' has been unsuccessful. I do have a token from the neighbouring town of Frome (Figure 3). It also has a stocking on the obverse. The legend on the obverse is IOHN SANDERS OF FROVME, and on the reverse the inscription in the centre is A FARTHING and the surrounding legend is IN SVMERSET SHEIRE 1671. Although it is similar to the Batcombe token it would not be suitable for my purpose. Several towns in Somerset were involved in the stocking-making industry, which was big business in 17th century England.

I have not been to Batcombe or even to Somerset, but from the pictures I've seen it looks like a typical English village with an old stone church at its centre (Figure 4). Anyway I know just what it would be like because I watch *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Midsomer Murders* on television. So there is no need for me to travel to England.

King Arthur and Queen Guinevere (Figure 5) are supposed to have been buried at Glastonbury. In 1191 it was claimed that their graves had been discovered and their bones re-interred in the abbey. Following the dissolution of the monasteries in the reign of Henry VIII the abbey was vandalized and no trace of their remains has been found.

The legends of King Arthur and the



2. Approaching the summit of Glastonbury Tor. Photo by John Champion courtesy of wikipedia commons.

Knights of the Round Table tell of the quest to find the Holy Grail, which was the vessel used by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper and the one used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch his blood as he hung on the Cross. It possessed miraculous powers. At the Round Table in King Arthur's palace one chair had no name on it because it was reserved for the



1. Glastonbury Abbey (Image US Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsc-08401)



3A Frome Token obverse
(Author's specimen)



3B Frome Token reverse
(Author's specimen)



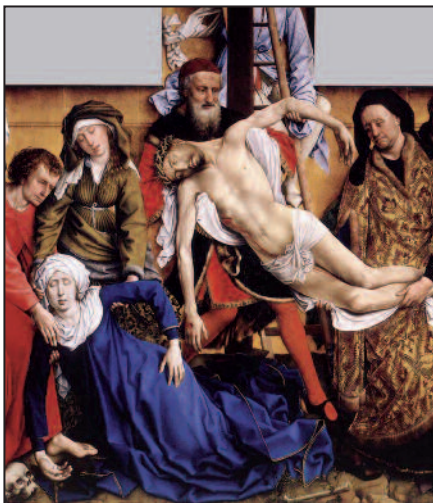
4 View of Batcombe

knight who found the Grail. In the 1913 picture, 'It is indeed the Cup', by Evelyn Paul (Figure 7) the successful knight returns to the castle and holds high the holy cup. According to the legend it had been brought to England by Joseph of Arimathea.

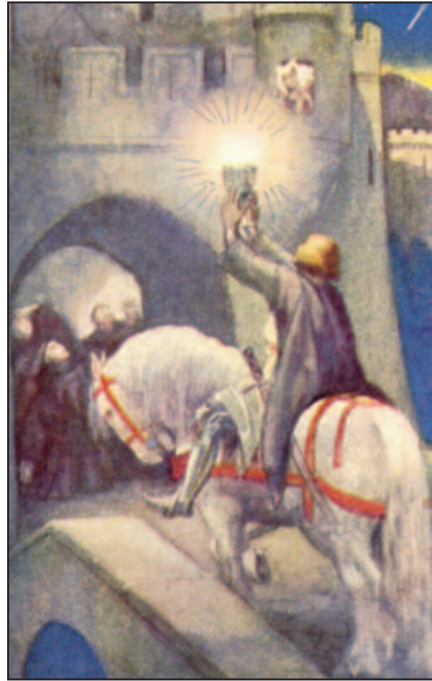
Glastonbury is of special interest to Christians because of the legend about Joseph of Arimathea. The Gospels record that it was Joseph who took Jesus' body down from the Cross (Figure 6) and laid it in his own tomb. According to the legend Joseph was involved in the tin trade and brought Jesus to England sometime between Jesus' visit to the Temple in Jerusalem when he was 12 and the beginning of his ministry when he was 30.



5 An allegorical illustration of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere



6. Joseph holds Jesus' body (Detail of painting by Rogier van der Weyden, 1435.) Image courtesy of wikipedia Commons



7. Evelyn Paul, "It is indeed the Cup" (1913) from: "The Quest of the Saint Graal" in Claire de Lune and Other Troubadour Romances By Michael West. Image www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/images/paulgrl.htm

This inspired the famous English poet and mystic, William Blake, to write:

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?*

*And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic mills?*

The legend of Joseph of Arimathea goes on to relate that after Jesus' Resurrection Joseph came with eleven companions to Glastonbury to preach the Gospel. When they finally arrived in the Glastonbury area after their long journey they were exhausted and on a hill that became known as Wearyall Hill Joseph thrust his hawthorn walking-staff into the ground. The staff took root and grew into the Glastonbury Thorn (Figure 8). Its botanical name is *Crataegus monogyna praecox*, and it flowers twice a year, in spring and at Christmas. The flowering in midwinter was considered miraculous, and it was the Bishop of Bath and Wells, during the reign of James I, who initiated the custom of sending a budding branch to the Queen every Christmas. Nowadays it is the Vicar of Glastonbury who sends the branch. The original bush survived until the English Civil War (1642-45) when Roundheads cut it down because they considered it to be a relic of superstition. It was thought that a gentleman named Henry Gutch, a mercer of Glastonbury, had witnessed the destruction of the 'Sacred Thorn' and, to spite the Roundheads, had adopted it as the design



8. Glastonbury Thorn.

Image courtesy Wikipedia Commons

on the token that he issued in 1653 and 1666 (Figure 9).

For this information about the Glastonbury Token I am grateful to my friend, Rev. Richard Plant, who is a Methodist minister in Yorkshire and the author of several numismatic books, some of which have become classics. The story of the Glastonbury Token will appear in the 2nd edition of Richard's book, *A Numismatic Journey through the Bible*.



9A and 9B. Drawing of Glastonbury Token obverse and reverse. Image courtesy of Rev. Richard Plant.

But all is not what it seems! Richard tells me that in 1993 Robert Thompson pointed out that ever since Mr Boyne in his 1858 book on Somerset tokens had described the obverse of the token as 'The Glastonbury Thorn', everyone had been looking at it the wrong way round. If you turn the token upside down it becomes Glastonbury Tor topped, not by a tree trunk, but by the tower of St Michael's church. The base of the tor has been rounded simply to fit the circular shape of the coin (Figure 10). Unfortunately there is no evidence that Joseph of Arimathea ever visited England. Instead of the weary saint traipsing around Somerset, the locals might have been observing the leader of the missionaries who came to the area in the 2nd century AD. Also the Holy Grail might simply have been the cup that he used in the Eucharist. I'm sorry to be such a spoil-sport.

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10. Drawing of Glastonbury Token obverse (right way up) Image courtesy of Rev. Richard Plant.