

# GLASTONBURY

England

September 12, 2009

Words and photos by Victor E. Smith©



The magical,  
The mystical,  
The mysterious,  
The miraculous  
All start as an inkling deep within,  
The twinkling of a tiny star in distant space,  
Blinking on and off,  
Beckoning one across the chasm between the all-too-real  
And the utterly fantastic.

*Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to my family and friends. Christmas Eve, 2009*

Like most westerners, I'm fascinated by the legends of King Arthur and the Holy Grail. This summer, by chance (?), I picked up the book *King Arthur's Avalon, The Story of Glastonbury*, by Geoffrey Ashe and was in the middle of it when I was asked to go to London on business. My first day there would be my only free day, and Glastonbury is well out of the city, so I asked a trusted friend, who had spent some years in England, if he thought the effort worthwhile. "I love Glastonbury," he said with a light in his eyes that I knew I had to go there.

So, early in the morning of September 12, 2009, I pushed through a fog of jet lag and got myself to Paddington Station. The train headed southwest—my first foray into the English countryside—and arrived two hours later in Castle Cary, with Glastonbury still

several miles away. But there was a taxi in the parking lot and its driver, an area native, proved hospitable and informative. In a land renowned for its mist and fog, she congratulated me for picking such a fine day to visit. Such people remind me, no matter how far from home I am, that I am well taken care of. I just have to set myself in the right direction and the rest will come.

She relished my questions, no matter how skeptical they seemed. Why had the abbey, for a millennium one of the Church's proudest institutions, once equal to Westminster itself, been reduced to a remnant of stone by Henry VIII? And what of the Christian tradition that the biblical Joseph of Arimathea had migrated to the area from Judea, bringing two cruets containing the blood of Jesus, which he enshrined in a tiny wattle church on the very grounds that later became a thriving abbey? And was it possible, as it was claimed, that the legends of Arthur and Merlin, of Camelot and Avalon, of the Grail itself, were based on actual people and events that occurred in the Glastonbury region? Were Arthur and his queen Guinevere really buried on the abbey grounds? Could the Tor, the hill above the town, have once been the fabulous isle of Avalon, that the ancient Celts held to be a gateway into realms beyond this vale of tears? I wish I had a photo of the certainty on that woman's face as she smiled and nodded away each of my doubts. "We live here. We know," she'd reply simply.

After taking me on a quick tour of the little town, an odd juxtaposition of medieval masonry and New Age shops, my adopted guardian angel dropped me appropriately in front of the entrance to the abbey grounds.

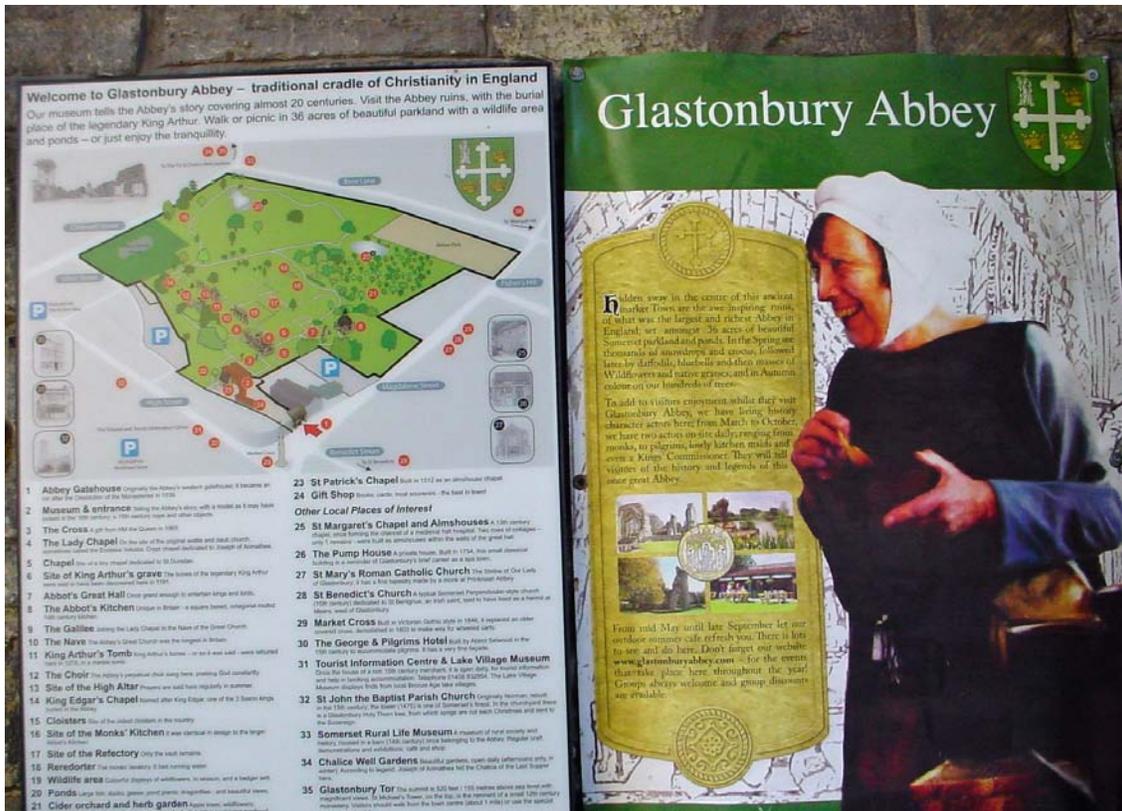


*English countryside around Castle Cary. A sinkhole in the foreground demonstrates that low-lying area was once covered by water.*

# 1. GLASTONBURY ABBEY: The Past

*“The Glastonbury landscape is weird. Yet the essence of its weirdness is hard to catch.... Glastonbury’s magic is polyhedral. It is as a national shrine, standing for the creative reconciliation of races and provinces.... Yet this same focal power has made the place a storm center of conflict.... Glastonbury has proved a testing ground for Christianity supplanting the legacy of Druidism, for the Roman order supplanting the Celtic, for the Church supplanting the cults. It is a No Man’s Land and all men’s land: it is the Garden of the Hesperides and a Catholic sanctuary.... And still, through all that history of mysterious warfare and mysterious truce, the landscape endures. The enchantments of mist and sunset transform it from one day to another, and its final secrets remain elusive.”*

King Arthur’s Avalon, The Story of Glastonbury, Arthur Ashe



Poster on the cloister wall at the abbey entrance. Note the map with the layout of the grounds.

This mysterious place, as Ashe describes it, is best experienced and comprehended, I found, by seeing it as many levels, a Mayan step-temple or an Egyptian pyramid, rising from the base, where the Abbey is located, to the Chalice Well grounds, halfway up the hill, to the Tor, the peak topped by Saint Michael’s Tower. There are many interim layers between, for sure; but these three, a sort of trinity, are the defining bands that represent the threesome found in many of the world’s great traditions: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Past, Present and Future; Be, Do, Have.

To come into contact with its essence and be changed by the experience, Glastonbury has to be traversed on pilgrim’s foot, I realized as I was puffing my way up that hill, not through the window of a tour bus. Its atmosphere and message has to wind through your bones to your heart. So, it is the pictures that better capture the flavors of this unique place. The words came later.

## ***The Lady Chapel***

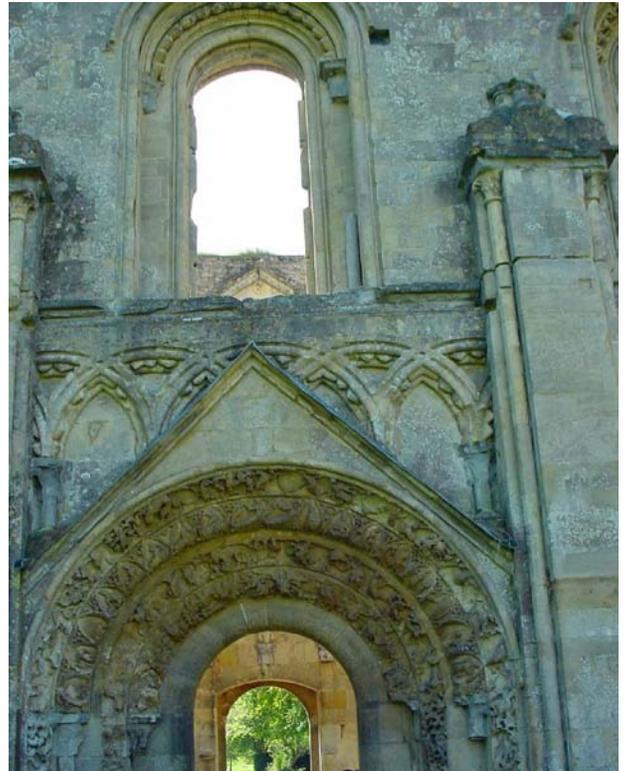


A bit of historical irony: the structure first encountered on passing through the cloister walls onto the abbey grounds is called The Lady Chapel.

As the sign indicates, it was erected on the sacred site where Joseph of Arimathea, one of Jesus' direct disciples, is said to have built the first church in Britain.

It is not known when, by whom, or to whom The Lady Chapel was dedicated. Mother Mary is a primary candidate for The Lady. Mary Magdalene is also in the running. Maybe it was both, or neither. The ambiguity seems intentional. Perhaps it was dedicated to The Lady, the afterwards-neglected, even vilified, Divine Feminine. The irony: the abbey was a community exclusively for men during a time when the church was turning away from the egalitarian model of Jesus' original community, adopting instead the patriarchal model of imperial Rome.

Also ironic, The Lady Chapel, though much smaller in size and importance, remains more intact than the main cathedral building behind it.

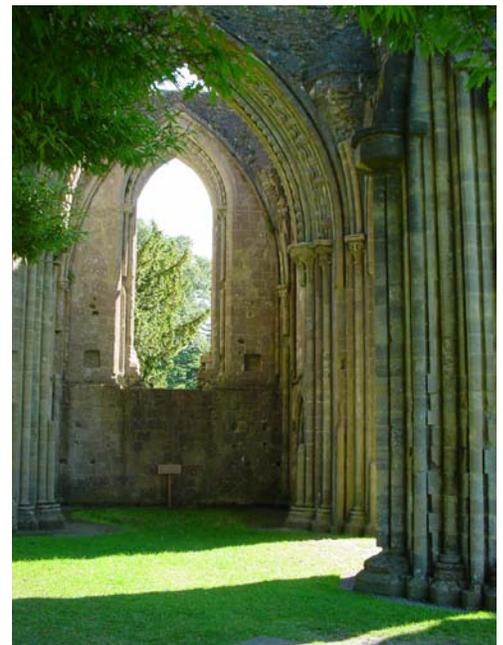


*The main entrance to The Lady Chapel..*



*Above: Still-used altar in the crypt of the Lady Chapel.*

*Right: Walls in ruin and Nature in bloom blended harmoniously.*



## *The Abbey Cathedral*



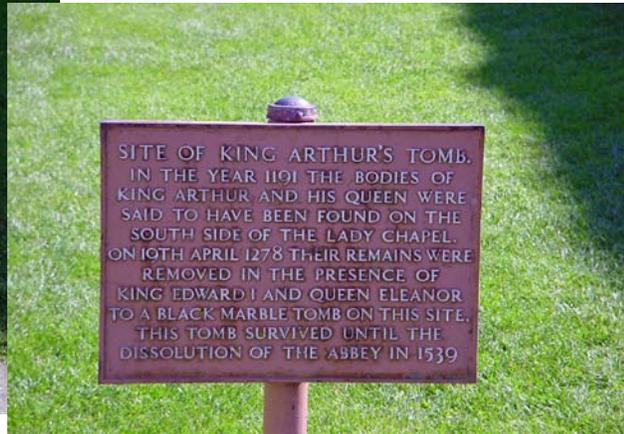
The supports on either side of the main entrance to the Cathedral maintain their poise, though they, like many members of the monastery at its demise, lost their heads to Henry VIII. I had to compare this scene to Stonehenge, just a few miles to the east. What history have these monuments witnessed that we can only guess at? How noble and enduring the human effort to honor the Great Spirit has been, and so remains!



## Arthur's Tomb



The driver assured me it was here. Still, to be standing and reading the sign, as one would read any other gravestone, took my breath away.



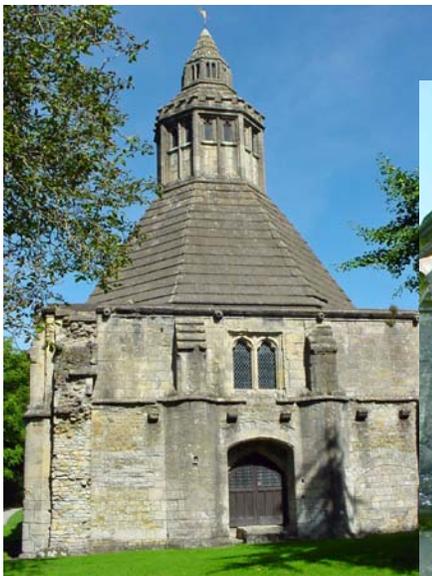
*View of the cathedral from the westernmost point. The high altar was between the pillar remnants in the foreground, Arthur's tomb just in front of the main entrance, and The Lady Chapel framed at center in the distance.*

## ***The Nature Preserve***



Appropriately, a portion of the ground's are dedicated to the preservation of the region's Nature. Amazing that the structures built by men rise and fall in a single cycle, while natural things are born, live and die over and over and over again.

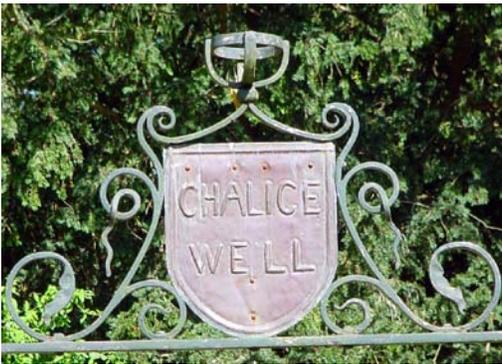
## ***The Abbot's Kitchen***



And then there is the Abbot's kitchen, which survived the destruction of the church buildings. Several clever reconstructions inside dramatize the details of culinary life at the time. Made me wonder whimsically: In a contest between spirit and stomach, guess which wins?

## 2. THE CHALICE WELL: The Deeper Past

I made my way through the streets that wrapped around the around the abbey's perimeter and up the still gently sloping hill. In the distance, for the first time, I caught sight of the famed Tor and the Tower of Saint Michael. It seemed impossibly high and distant.



And it might have proved so had I not paused for refreshment and meditation in the serenity of the Chalice Well Gardens.

Rich in iron, the water flows red from the well above into beautifully designed pools throughout the Garden. My friend from New York told me about a glass at one of the fountains from which visitors drank. The glass was there, two in fact, and, despite the water's bloody color, I drank and was refreshed.





I finally reached the top of the Garden and the Chalice Well itself. It is unknown what, if anything, is actually in the well, but its name indicates the common belief; and from a chalice it is an easy leap to the Holy Grail itself. The lid of the well is adorned with the Vesica Piscis, two interlocking circles, symbolizing the union of heaven and earth or spirit and matter.



It is peaceful here. I remind myself to pause and partake of that peace as other pilgrims are doing. It is in the silence that we come to know. I breathe deeply, become quiet, and melt into the sun and flowers and trees around me. I spread out even while going deeply within—as if into the Chalice Well—and felt the thrill of being still and knowing, just knowing.

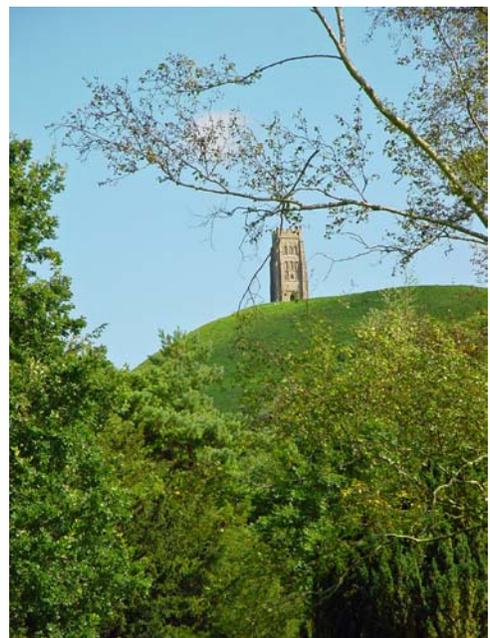
When I opened my eyes, I saw the tower again, so much closer now.

It seemed like the perfect dream.

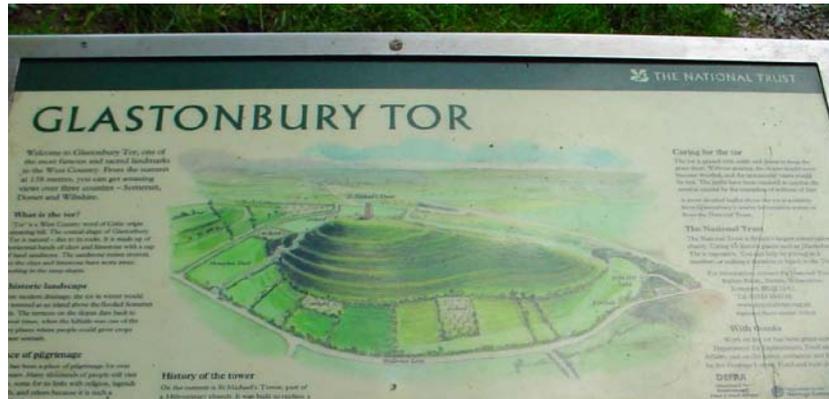
How could there be places like this—on planet Earth?

A silly question, I answered myself, because it can have no answer.

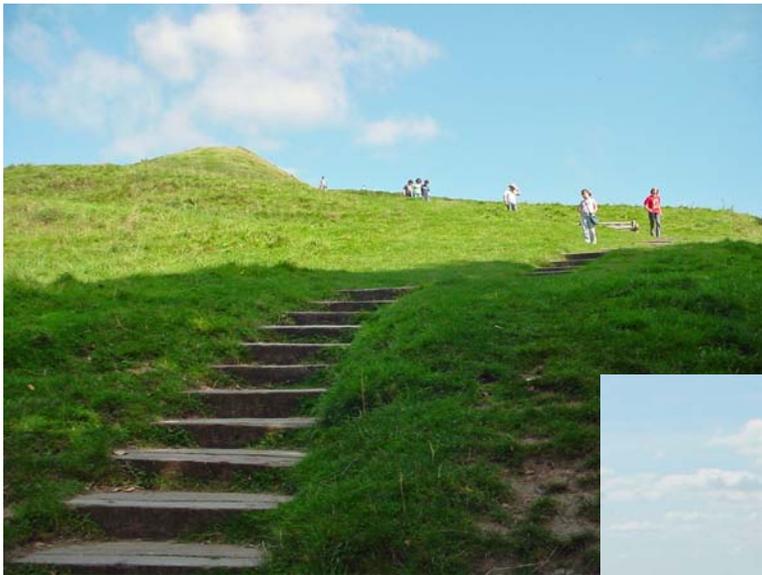
Then I knew It was time to climb to the top.



### 3. THE TOR: Beyond The Past



*Sign marking the trailhead of Glastonbury Tor. Notice that the terraced layers resemble the stepped construction of the Meso-American pyramids. The graphic also illustrates how this might have been the island of Avalon in the Arthurian legends. A later network of canals devised to drain the land turned the base area into dry land. Not proof that this was Avalon, but it makes it possible.*



The view climbing up!

And looking down!

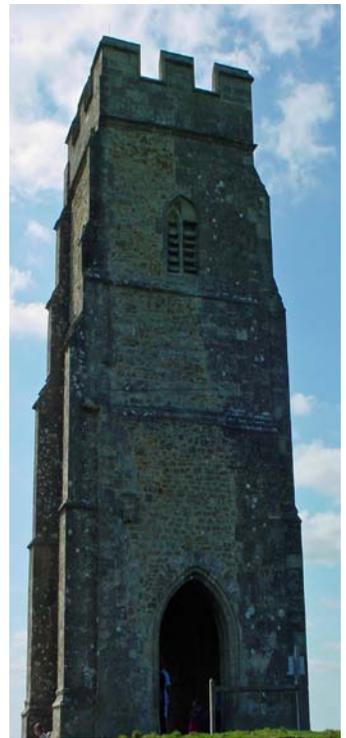




Someone volunteered to take my picture. Proof I really was here, in the flesh, knapsack on my back, camera case over my shoulder, gray locks and toothy grin. Looking like I relish these adventures. Come to think of it, I do.

Ok, stop posing and make those old legs work their way to the top. That tower proves elusive. You think you're just about there and it sinks behind yet another hill to be climbed.

St. Michael's Tower is another oddity in this place bent to defy normal human logic. Only this one tower remains, and quite intact, while all traces of the church once attached to it have vanished. Some claim this is the revenge of the old Druidic gods angered because the Christians usurped their sacred place. Be that as it may, it is known that Henry VIII had the last abbot of Glastonbury dragged to the top of the Tor, then hanged, drawn and quartered there for defying the king's will. If a place is haunted by its history, that alone could do it.



It was getting late. Time to return.



Cows were grazing on the slopes of the Tor and sheep in the lower meadows, just as they'd been doing for millennia and hopefully will continue to do. Past, present and future: for the sheep and cattle, at least, they are one.

## ***Final Salute***

As the shadows lengthened, I worked my way back to the Abbey where the cabby from Castle Cary had agreed to meet me in time to catch the train back to London. Turned out, I had to wait a few minutes. I was drawn to revisit Arthur's tomb.

During the day, someone had placed a single red rose upon it. I thought: perhaps The Lady from the Chapel laid it there. Would he, come night, rise up and return to her?

With scintillations running through my body, quite unlike anything I'd ever felt before, and tears in my eyes, I raised the camera to take my final photo. Appropriately, in the picture, my shadow is shown saluting Arthur and The Lady's rose, the climax of this magical, mystical, mysterious, miraculous dream called Glastonbury!



*Vic, the shadow, taking a picture of King Arthur's tomb. Glastonbury Abbey, Sept. 12, 2009. Certainly, one of my all-time favorite photos.*