TINTAGEL CASTLE

Castle Road, Tintagel, Cornwall PL34 0HE

25th March 2022

Having lived in Cornwall since 1976, this was amazingly only our third known visit to Tintagel – or Din Tagell, *Fortress of the Narrow Entrance*. Other visits have been lost in the mists of time, like the myths of King Arthur and Merlin, Tristan and Iseult and even earlier history – but I'm ahead of myself (or perhaps too far back).

The location of Tintagel Castle is unusual and spectacular, situated on both sides of a chasm between the mainland and what is known as the island. This island is actually a peninsula joined to the mainland by a narrow neck of land, made easily accessible today by the building of a new bridge.

In the Middle Ages, people would have walked from one side to the other via a narrow land bridge as high as the cliff tops, but between the 14th and 17th centuries, the land bridge eroded, leaving the castle divided by a deep chasm. Previously (and remembered from our earlier visits), the climb to the castle up the side of the cliff face on 148 deep, steps was challenging to say the least.

After parking the car on Glebe Cliff, near St Materiana Church, we began the walk downwards on the cliff path, as the island and the bridge came ever closer.

The island with the bridge far right

There's no doubt that the new bridge looked daunting from a distance, with a drop beneath that would be capable of unnerving the steadiest of walkers, let alone those with a fear of bridges. However, it now allows stunning coastal views and is an admirable feat of engineering – and I was surprised how little I felt scared.

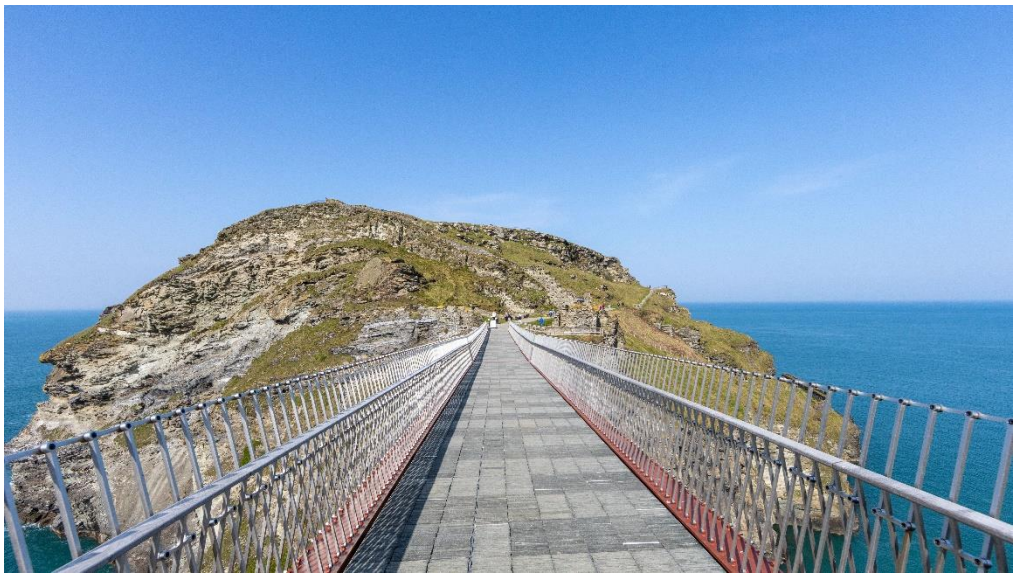
It was begun in June 2018 and completed in August 2019, a slender 223 feet/68 metres structure, made of Cornish Delabole slate slotted into steel cradles. Fitted along its length are stainless steel balustrades, designed to be so fine that they disappear against the sky when viewed from a distance. I can vouch for this, although I was more taken with how the bridge once again in effect linked the 13th-century gatehouse on the mainland to the castle on the island.

A closer view of the bridge (photo by Alan Santillo)

The mainland section of the castle is in two parts, consisting of lower and upper wards. The lower ward is the courtyard that forms the entrance to the whole castle, enclosed on the north-east and south-east sides by a curtain wall. The upper ward is on top of the crag with a further curtain wall and small buildings once belonging to the medieval castle, where imported pottery dating from the 5th to 7th centuries has been discovered.

The medieval gateway at this end of the courtyard forms the entrance to the castle and outside this is the great ditch that dates from the 5th to 7th centuries, which made the headland into a promontory fort. Several more banks and mounds are visible further inland and uphill, although they have not been fully investigated and their date is so far unknown.

I must confess that I paid scant attention to the mainland, as we approached the bridge and prepared to cross to the island. It wasn't too long after opening time, so we were able to walk across with hardly anyone in sight:



Feeling perfectly safe from this angle (photo by Alan Santillo)

Once across, we were on the island's inner ward and looking at the great hall built on a sheltered terrace, with views out over the deep channel of water below. However, before the great hall was built in the 13th century, this area was a main focus of the earlier 5th to 7th century occupation, where large quantities of Mediterranean pottery have been unearthed. Even before that time, speculation exists about the part Tintagel played in the history of Cornwall.

When southern Britain was invaded and occupied by the Roman Empire in the 1st century AD, the territory that includes Cornwall was named after the local British tribal group that the Romans called the Dumnonii. During the 3rd century AD, the local tin streaming industry gathered momentum and archaeologists believe that due to the interest in this, a road passed nearby Tintagel.

Although excavations have failed to indicate any structure on the island from the Roman era, a quantity of Romano-British pottery has been unearthed, as well as a Roman-style drawstring leather purse containing Roman coins dating from between around 270 AD to 361 AD. There was obviously activity of some sort!

After the collapse of the Roman Empire in Britain, the kingdom of Dumnonia (that included Tintagel) came into existence, with its own monarchy. Archaeologists believe there was a settlement at Tintagel Castle inhabited by Dumnonian royalty whenever they were in the area, as the royal entourage would most likely have travelled around other royal sites in Devon and Cornwall.

Tintagel was also made defensible, with a large ditch at the entrance and access via the narrow neck of land. The site's precipitous headland was a natural defence, with extensive seaward views. In its favour, it also had supplies of fresh water.

The quantity and quality of items unearthed at Tintagel, such as Carthaginian dishes, Aegean amphorae and Byzantine jars, are evidence of significant Mediterranean trade. Archaeologists consider that because such a high quantity of goods has been found here on only a small percentage of examined land, compared with the combined quantity of all such British sites, Tintagel was a key place where ships docked to trade their luxury goods for desirable Cornish tin.

From the open sea into Tintagel (photo by Alan Santillo)

The sheer amount of pottery found indicates that Tintagel was not merely a trading station, since so many of the goods must have been used on site. The remains of 100+ small rectangular huts around the island, several with hearths, confirms this theory. Some huts were excavated in the 1930s, but more were exposed by a turf fire in 1983. The remains consist of low stone walls that probably supported timber and turf superstructures, with thatched roofs or local slate. After the mid-7th century, though, there is scant evidence of activity on the island for 500+ years.

Back to where we'd found ourselves standing in the castle courtyard of the inner ward and looking at the great hall, an English Heritage information board offered an intriguing window into the late medieval past. It described a scene in 1242, when servants and tradesmen were preparing for a feast. Richard, Earl of Cornwall, was due to arrive and his young nephew, the Welsh prince Dafydd ap Llewelyn, was resting in the guest accommodation.

Dafydd was suffering from a nervous illness because his lands in Gwynedd had been invaded by the English King Henry III, Richard's older brother. Dafydd had come to seek advice from his well-connected uncle. However, poor Dafydd's nervous illness could not have been helped when soon after the visit, Richard campaigned in Wales on Henry's behalf against Dafydd. A wasted visit indeed.

The Great Hall (in poor lighting conditions)

In May 1233, Richard (1209-1272) as the newly created Earl of Cornwall, had bought the island of Tintagel from Gervase de Tintagel, formerly Gervase Hornicote. To be precise, Richard had traded some land given to him by his brother Henry III in 1225, when 'Richard's castle' was already named. Presumably the castle had been built between 1225, when King Henry had granted his brother the county of Cornwall, and 1233 when Richard decided he wanted to own it.

Apart from the futile visit from Dafydd ap Llewelyn, little is known of how much the castle was used. Earl Richard was very much involved in international affairs, which included going on crusade to the Holy Land in 1240 and becoming King of the Romans (king of Germany) in 1257. Since the site of Tintagel Castle was of no military value to the very rich and ambitious earl, it would seem that this is where the legend of King Arthur comes strongly into the story.

There's no doubt that history and legend are inseparable at Tintagel Castle. It's very likely that Earl Richard was eager to establish and maintain the connection between Tintagel and the Arthurian legends and to this end, the castle was built in a more old-fashioned style to appear more ancient.

The Arthur legend was established by the writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth (1095-1155), a Welsh cleric who wrote *Historia Regum Britanniae* – a history of kings who had ruled the Britons for the preceding 2,000 years. Although amongst the greatest pieces of medieval history, it isn't especially an accurate one. It appears that Geoffrey took a series of legends and transformed them into a single account.

In the case of Arthur, he narrated a tale that had been passed down generations by word of mouth. Uther Pendagron, King of Britain, was besotted with Igraine, the beautiful wife of Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall. With the help of the wizard Merlin, Uther assumed the likeness of Gorlois and tricked his way into Gorlois' castle at Tintagel, where he had his wicked way and Arthur was conceived.

This legend is backed up somewhat by the story of Tristan, known from German and French poems later in the 12th century, which appear to have drawn on Cornish legends. Tintagel makes an appearance in these poems as the court of Tristan's uncle, King Mark of Kernow (which has a certain ring to it).

However, much controversy continues about these legends. Although Geoffrey of Monmouth mentioned Tintagel Castle as the place of Arthur's conception, he wrote nowhere that Arthur was born there, visited there, or owned the property when he became king. Many archaeologists and historians continue to dispute the issue of Arthur and Tintagel, but others disagree, stating that the legendary figure of Arthur or Arturus would have been an early medieval British leader fighting the migrating Anglo-Saxons settling in Britain at that time. Who can say?

As we walked beyond the great hall and its service buildings, such as kitchen, pantry and buttery, the handsome ruins of a crenellated wall up the steep hillside and a perfectly formed doorway in front of us took my attention completely.

Atmospheric ruins – the north gate

After passing through the perfectly formed doorway from the inner ward, the castle's proximity to the sea was inescapable. Life must have been very windy indeed in buildings so prone to the elements in weather of all kinds – so it seems small wonder that the castle was comparatively little used.

A room with a (windy) sea view (photo by Alan Santillo)

After Earl Richard, the royal family rarely visited the castle. Edward the Black Prince (1330-1376) had the great hall re-made into smaller buildings, but since the castle was no longer occupied by the earls of Cornwall, it was given to the county sheriff. A small staff of constable, gatekeeper, porter and chaplain was employed, while the sheriff used part of the castle as a hardly used prison – although in the late 14th-century, two prisoners were brought from London.

The land was let as pasture, the castle became ever more ruinous and there was damage from progressive erosion of the isthmus joining the island to the mainland. By the early 1540s, access to the island was via a makeshift bridge of tree trunks. In the 1580s, when England was threatened with Spanish invasion, defences were strengthened at the Iron Gate – this was originally a defended wall guarding a slate platform, clinging to the rocky sides of the island.

By 1600, the castle was mostly deserted, although the letting for sheep pasture continued until the 19th century. Although the castle was little used, however, the Arthurian legends had still flourished over the centuries. In 1480 it had been cited as the place of Arthur's birth and the first reference to King Arthur's Castle was first found in 1650. By that time, references to King Arthur and Tintagel Castle had become an inseparable mix of literary legends and local folklore.

In the Victorian era, fascination with Arthurian legends had taken hold and the castle ruins became a tourist destination. The Revd. R B Kinsman was honorary constable and had the courtyard wall built complete with its gate. Until then, the steps on either side of the isthmus were somewhat dangerous and a guide was employed to conduct visitors into the castle. Knowing how precarious the pre-new-bridge access seemed to me, I can only imagine how intrepid Victorian tourists in their restrictive Victorian clothing attacked the ascent and descent!

As we walked the designated route around the contour of the island, more building footprints appeared, clinging onto the hillside with the sea stretching away in front, a very long way down. It wouldn't have been my chosen location…

Hugging the hillside (photo by Alan Santillo)

A considerable number of building remains at the northern end of the island would have belonged to the earlier settlement of around 700 AD. English Heritage had rather poetically named these the Northern Ruins or Dark Age Buildings, which I liked. Although there was a path to be followed, it was easy to leave the semi-beaten track and explore the area more fully.

Some of the remains looked quite substantial and in one of them a circular structure looked at first glance like a well. It was, in fact, a circular corn-drying kiln, similar to some discovered at the 13th to 14th century village of Hound Tor on Dartmoor, Devon. If the building at Tintagel is indeed from that same era, it indicates there was a small-scale farm at Tintagel growing grain crops at the time when the castle was built, preceded by the earlier community.

The corn-drying kiln (photo by Alan Santillo)

As we continued, the now famous sculpture of King Arthur came into view. Standing at 8 feet/2.4 metres, he was a commanding presence ideally placed on the edge of a rugged promontory that looked out over the Atlantic Ocean. He was popularly attracting a captive audience, many of whom wanted to stand beside him – which made taking a solo photo slightly difficult. I managed!

'Gallos' – or the King Arthur Sculpture

English Heritage had commissioned the sculpture, which was completed by the Welsh sculptor Rubin Eynon and installed in April 2016. Made of solid bronze, it had been easier to fly him in by helicopter, rather than attempting a tortuous journey up the pre-new-bridge steps. He had been named Gallos from the Cornish word for power and his larger-than-life presence definitely exuded a sense of quiescent power. Maybe it was the sword and the hidden face…

As we continued along the path, a small detour downwards led to the walled garden, where instead of plants and flowers, a perimeter of slate stepping stones were engraved with the story of Tristan and Iseult. The garden had probably been built in the 1230s and could well have been part of a romantic literary landscape, since in the world of legend, Tristan and Iseult were as significant as King Arthur.

By the 13th century, English royalty had become enthusiastically interested in gardens (much like many people in the 2020 lockdown) and although this garden was in an exposed position where few plants would have flourished, it's possible that it was transformed with temporary plants when Earl Richard visited.

Alternatively, Earl Richard may have been eager to create the garden specifically to illustrate Tintagel's connection with the Tristan and Iseult story, in the same way he had been eager to promote the King Arthur story. The proximity of the garden to the chapel does give more credence to this possibility.

The walled garden

The story goes that on their voyage from Ireland, the knight Tristan and the princess Iseult drank a love potion by mistake and fell deeply in love. On their arrival at Tintagel, King Mark and Iseult were married, but Iseult and Tristan often met in the garden when all were asleep at night.

Their affair was discovered and King Mark was informed. One night he hid in the branches of a tree and attempted to eavesdrop, but Tristan noticed the king's shadow in the moonlight. He signalled the king's location to Iseult and the lovers pretended to argue, with Iseult swearing her loyalty to the king. Upon hearing this, King Mark was filled with pity and declared he would never suspect Tristan and Iseult again. As legends go, it's an acceptable one.

We continued on the path until we came to the chapel on the summit of the island. It's thought to have been built before the medieval castle, constructed on the ruins of the Dark Age settlement, although the current remains are contemporary with the castle remains. Its location away from the main castle buildings, plus several rock-hewn graves in the vicinity, certainly indicate the re-use of an older site.

Around the chapel are buildings of various dates, some of them overlying others and interconnecting, which in turn suggests a complicated sequence of uses. A small doorway on the southern side was blocked when a larger porch was built at the west end in the 13th century.

The chapel was dedicated to a saint who has been referred to with a variety of names - Hulanus, Ulette, Uletta, Juliot, Julitta, Juliette and Julianta - hopefully she didn't suffer from a split personality. She is believed to have come from Wales, although other sources assume she is local. Whatever her origins, she would have found the chapel well-placed in its lofty elevation, with its extensive views.

An English Heritage board described a scene in November 1361, with a weary priest making his way to the chapel in driving rain, as he'd done daily for many years. He was paid 50 shillings a year to celebrate daily mass and say prayers for the castle's owner, Edward, Duke of Cornwall (later the Black Prince), who'd never visited. Most buildings were in disrepair and the chapel was cold and draughty.

Chapel of St Juliot – or one of her other aliases (photo by Alan Santillo)

The priest had had enough and resolved not to spend another winter on the lonely, windswept headland. He had never had a pay rise and his only company in the long dark evenings was the elderly constable. He finally left his position and was replaced a month later. What happened to the elderly constable, I know not.

Returning to the present, we lingered awhile to look at the view, before taking the path downwards. Back at the level of the great hall, we saw an Exit sign through the Victorian courtyard wall, leading down the old way on steep steps. Somehow failing to take a photo of this wall and doorway, we followed others down.

Near the bottom, I turned around and saw the new bridge way above – it had looked much safer when walking across than when viewed from the underneath…

Whoa!

It had been a most enjoyable return visit to the castle, although the walk up the cliff paths from the bottom to the top of Glebe Cliff was punishing. I'm convinced that most steps, buildings and nearly everything in the world is constructed by tall people with much longer legs than mine! What irked me more, though, was that we forgot to visit the exhibition that has some very interesting artefacts.

There have been various archaeological digs over the years. Ralegh Radford's extensive excavations of 1933-9 were largely clearance work to show building remains to the public, although the discovery of many pottery fragments proved Tintagel's Mediterranean trading links during the early medieval period. However, this dig came to an abrupt end with the outbreak of war in 1939 and many site reports were destroyed in air raids by the German Luftwaffe.

Radford's interpretation that the early building remains were those of a Celtic monastery, which had inspired Geoffrey of Monmouth to relate the tale of Arthur's conception as being at Tintagel, remained unquestioned for 40 years.

During the 1990s, archaeological work was carried out by Glasgow University that uncovered a small inscribed piece of slate, referred to as 'the Artognou stone', dated to the 6th century AD. It is intriguingly scratched with various words, including three names, one of which is 'Artognou'. Although the similarity of the beginning of this name to Arthur seems significant, the fact remains that many British names began with 'Arto-' and later 'Arth-'. Close, but not close enough!

In 2016, English Heritage began a five-year research project in collaboration with Cornwall Archaeological Unit, to discover more of how people lived at Tintagel in the 5th to 7th centuries. Walls of more than 3.3 feet/1 metre thick were unearthed, plus high-end tableware and evidence of fine dining on pork, fish and oysters. It's believed the walls were part of the royal residence of the early medieval kingdom of Dumnonia – a very dense settlement, with a complex of buildings.

In 2017, a 2 feet/61 centimetres Cornish slate window ledge was found, inscribed with Latin and Greek letters, as well as Christian symbols, thought to be the work of a scribe practising his craft in the 7th century. The inscriptions indicate the writer was familiar with the informal style of writing used for documents and the formal script used in the illuminated Gospel books of the period.

The writing on the slate includes the Roman name 'Tito' (Titus) and the Celtic name 'Budic'. The Latin words 'fili' (son) and 'viri duo' (two men' are also there. Since inscribed writing from the medieval era rarely survives, this discovery was especially unusual, giving plausibility to the theory that Tintagel was a royal site, with a network of connections from Atlantic Europe to the Mediterranean and a seat of literate Christian culture. This slate is in the exhibition that we missed…

Finally we made it to the top of Glebe Cliff, where a vacant picnic table allowed us to rest and eat a packed lunch. It was very peaceful gazing out at the coastline stretching in front of us and the church of St Materiana a stone's throw away, with Celtic cross grave markers visible over its Cornish hedging wall – that is, a hedge built of stone and earth, with plants (and sometimes trees) increasing its strength.

There's no doubt Tintagel has a unique place in history, one where myth and fact mingle in intriguing harmony amid spectacular scenery. A legendary place indeed!

Appreciating a wall on the mainland during an earlier visit
(photo by Alan Santillo)

A view of the old access from mainland to island
(photo by Alan Santillo)