

## MERLIN

Of Merlin and his skill what Region doth not heare  
The world shall still be full of Merlin everie where.  
A thousand lingering yeares his prophecies have runne,  
And scarcely shall have end till time itself be done.

Michael Drayton, Poly-olbion, Song V.

In 1622, the renowned English poet Michael Drayton predicted that Merlin's world-wide fame may last to the end of time. Four centuries later, Merlin's star certainly shows no sign of fading. He's been the topic of books, novels, plays, academic research, websites, films, numerous television series and artwork. It seems that each generation re-discovers Merlin, and that in each generation this mysterious figure from our distant past continues to capture our imagination.

Merlin, or Myrddin to give him his Welsh name, is perhaps best known for being King Arthur's adviser and wizard in the Arthurian legends. Geoffrey of Monmouth, the twelfth Century writer who brought together Arthurian stories in his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, written 1136, provides the first depiction of Merlin as he is popularly portrayed today. However, Geoffrey was drawing on far older sources. He combined existing tales of Myrddin Wylt (Merlinus Caledonenis) a northern 'wild man of the woods' with no connection whatsoever to Arthur, with tales of the historic Romano-British war leader Ambrosius Aurelianus, to create the figure he named Merlin Ambrosius.

Stories about Merlin seem to have been widespread in the Celtic countries and on the continent during the dark ages and reached a peak of popularity in the medieval period. As a result, many places lay claim to an association with his life in some way.

The Welsh version of the legend - which is based on the Myrddin Wylt 'wild man of the woods' character - tells how Merlin, following his defeat in 573 at the Battle of Arfderydd (near Carlisle), lost his mind. He withdrew to Coed Celyddon, the Caledonian Forest in what would have been at the time the Welsh-speaking lowlands of southern Scotland. There he lived as a wild man with only forest animals and a piglet for company. As a result of his experiences during that long sojourn in the woods, Merlin became a prophet. Many of these prophecies were written down in poetic form during the ninth century, reputedly by Merlin himself, and a collection of them are recorded in the thirteenth century manuscript *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* – The Black Book of Carmarthen.

It is therefore, not surprising that many tales about Merlin are located in Carmarthenshire. Furthermore is clear that Merlin as poet and prophet was known in Wales as early as the tenth century, as he is referred to in the prophetic poem *Armes Prydein*, which forms a part of 'The Book of Taliesin'. This Welsh poem was composed by a supporter of the dynasty of Deheubarth (South –West Wales, of which modern day Carmarthenshire forms a significant part). Modern scholars believe that the writer was possibly an ecclesiast, though it is erroneously attributed

to the poet Taliesin. The connection therefore, between Merlin and the town of Carmarthen was made at least as early as the time when Armes Prydain was composed – some two centuries earlier than the Black Book of Carmarthen.

Finally, the sheer volume of sites and place names in the area including his oak tree, hill and cave, some stones and burial chambers suggests a tangible link.

## Merlin Awakes

Vortigern, known to the Welsh as Gwrtheyrn was king of Britannia, (today's Britain) during the fifth century. It was a time of great change. Not since the Roman invasion had the peoples of Britain suffered attack from outside forces, and that history was now a distant memory and the stuff of fireside tales. But, now there was a new threat – the Saxons.

Vortigern had unwittingly hired Saxon warlords as mercenary fighters against the unruly Picts of the north. These Saxons revolted and set up their own kingdoms. Gradually, the Saxon forces came to rule much of what we know as England today, forcing the native Britons to retreat into the western and northern quarters of the island: to Scotland, Wales and Cornwall. A sixth Century Welsh poem called Y Gododdin, tells of the final battle for the Brythonic territory of Gododdin between the British and Anglo Saxon forces. In it, Aneurin the poet describes the fate of the Brythonic army:

O drychant rhiallu yd grysiasant Gatraeth,  
Tru, namyn un gŵr nid atgorsant.

Of the regal army of three hundred men that hastened to Catraeth,  
Alas! none have returned, save one alone.

Vortigern appealed to his Druid advisors for guidance. They told him that he should withdraw to the high mountain ranges of Wales and there find a suitable place to build a stronghold from which he could govern and plan his counter attacks. Having searched long and hard, Vortigern came to the foothills of Yr Wyddfa – Snowdon, the highest mountain in his lands. He chose a steep sided, flat topped hill near the river Glaslyn, and his men set to work quarrying stone and building great walls that would protect Vortigern and his court.

Day after day they worked in the late summer heat to dig foundations and build the walls, but no progress was made. Each night the stone walls were demolished, and each morning on returning to work, the men would have to begin anew. After some weeks, Vortigern called a council of his druids. He asked them to discover why he could not build upon the hill, and what magic would counter whatever malevolent forces were destroying the walls at night. Having conferred, the Druids advised that Vortigern should seek out a boy who had no mortal father. If this boy was sacrificed, and his blood spilled upon the hilltop, then the troublesome spirits of the place would be appeased and work could continue without difficulty.

Vortigern duly sent men to search each corner of his kingdom to find such a boy. After a few months of fruitless searching, some of the men came to the old Roman town of Moridunum, known today as Carmarthen. There, near the old Roman amphitheatre, beneath the branches of a fine oak tree, they came across some young boys. One of these lads was being taunted by two others about his lack of a father. The soldiers became interested, and intervened in the boys' squabble. They enquired of his mother and the boy who introduced himself as Emrys took them to her. She was a princess of the region who now lived as a nun in the Priory at Carmarthen. She explained that she had been visited one night by a golden spirit, and it was through that visitation that her son had been conceived.

The soldiers took Emrys back to the north, and at dawn on a cold day in the depths of winter he was led by Vortigern's Druids to the summit of the hill. Realising what fate awaited him, he announced that killing him and spilling his blood would have no effect whatsoever. But, he said he knew what was causing the walls to fall each night:

*"Beneath this hill is a lake, and beneath that lake is a stone. Beneath that stone is a deep cave with two chambers. In each of these chambers sleeps a dragon. As you build your walls during the day, the weight presses down upon the dragons' backs and so at night, when they awake, they shake the land and your walls fall."*

When asked what should be done so that the fortress could be successfully built, Merlin advised that the underground lake should be drained, and the capstone beneath it excavated to reveal the cavern. Vortigern's men set to work at once, and found that everything was as Emrys described. They worked all day, until they were able to move the capstone to reveal a deep dark cavern in the heart of the hill.

That night, Vortigern, his Druids and warriors remained with Emrys and kept watch. Just as Emrys had predicted, as the last rays of light left the sky, the two dragons – one white, the other red - awoke. For many hours that night, they fought each other fiercely. At one point the red dragon seemed weak and unable to withstand the tireless onslaught of the white dragon, but eventually, in what seemed like a final desperate attack, the red dragon drove the white dragon out of the cave. It escaped through the opening and flew southwards.

*"What does this mean?"* asked Vortigern of his advisors. None could give him an answer except Emrys.

*"Sir",* he said, *"The red dragon symbolises the Brythonic peoples of this land, and the white dragon stands for the Saxons. This is a sign that in the end, the native people of this land will succeed in withstanding the Saxons."*

To this day, that hill is known as Dinas Emrys – Emrys' stronghold. But where does Merlin come in to this? Amazed at this boy's gifts of insight and prophecy, the Druids gave Emrys a new name – a name given to only the wisest and most enlightened poets and seers. They called him Myrddin – Merlin.

The white dragon continued its passage through the heartlands of Wales, heading south until eventually it came to the sea. Legend has it that as it came to the coastline in what we know today as Gower, the sun rose and the dragon was turned to stone. To this day, that peninsula in Gower is known as Worm's Head – 'worm' being the Anglo-Saxon word for dragon. From Carmarthenshire's coast, it is easy to trace the outline of the head, neck, body and tail of the dragon as it slopes into the water.

The red dragon fared somewhat better. It took its place on the Welsh flag as a guardian symbol for the land, and a device to which the Welsh have rallied in battle for many centuries. Merlin's first prophecy did come true; Wales was never defeated by the Anglo-Saxons. While later Norman and English Kings claimed rulership of the nation, it has never been conquered. Today, Y Ddraig Goch - 'The Red Dragon' as the flag is known, flies proudly outside the Senedd in Cardiff, Wales's own parliament.