

# Discord and Desecration at Esoteric Glastonbury

## The Long Shadows of the English Reformation

Hereward Tilton  
Exeter Centre for the Study of Esotericism  
Department of History  
University of Exeter

1st International Conference on Contemporary Esotericism  
Stockholm University, Sweden, 27-29 August 2012



Figures 1 and 2. The Glastonbury Thorn before and after its destruction on 9 December 2010

According to a legend post-dating the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII, when Joseph of Arimathea, great-uncle of Jesus, first arrived in Britain he landed at Glastonbury; planting his staff in the ground, it set down roots and was transformed into a hawthorn that miraculously flowers on Christmas Day. Until recently this thorn tree was still to be seen, alive, upon Wearyall Hill at Glastonbury. Its destruction in December 2010 elicited considerable grief and anger among the inhabitants of this Western English town, an eminent British site of religious pilgrimage and the focal point for a variety of neo-pagan, New Age and heterodox Christian groups. Whilst the perpetrators of this latest act of desecration are unknown, historically the persistence of the medieval cult of relics at Glastonbury has been met with a marked ambivalence



Figure 3. Joseph of Arimathea arrives at Glastonbury.  
Stained glass, Church of St. John the Baptist, Glastonbury, 1935

from Christian quarters. As Walsham has shown, in the post-Reformation era the Glastonbury Thorn became something of a symbol for the resilience of Catholic-pagan survivals in folk belief, and the Thorn was twice the target of Puritan axes. At present I am conducting research into the historical relationship of twentieth century esotericism at Glastonbury to the town's confessional history, focusing in particular on the union of esoteric notions of the *prisca theologia* with post-Reformation discourse on the primacy of a primitive British Church. My work is also concerned with the infiltration of esoteric notions into the shifting antiquarian and archaeological significance of the post-Reformation sacred landscape at Glastonbury, and the transformations effected upon that landscape by the folkloric and esoteric traditions in question. Today I will briefly sketch some basic lineaments of this research.

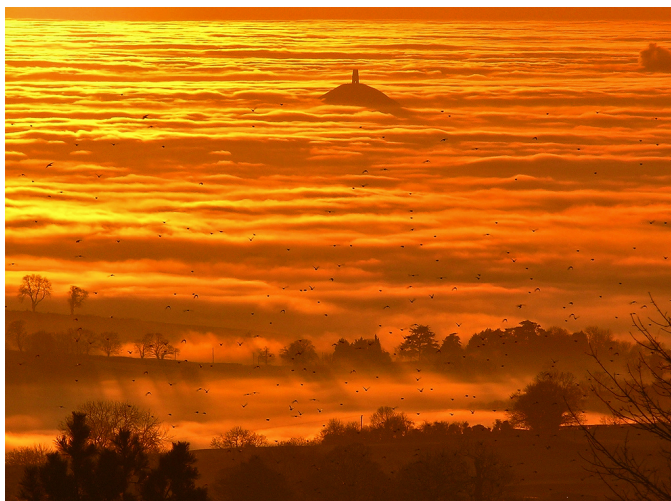


Figure 4.  
Glastonbury Tor.



At the heart of the Glastonbury cult of relics lies an intricate web of legends and pseudo-histories spawned by the vicissitudes of medieval monastic economic and political life. Let us turn first to the identification of Glastonbury with Avalon. A Saxon life of St. Dunstan written around 1000 AD makes mention of a “certain royal island on the boundary of western Britain” where the first British church was built; drawing on the imagery of the descent of the New Jerusalem given in the Book of Revelations, it is said this church was not made by human artifice but prepared by God Himself for the salvation of men. Some 200 years later, following the destruction of Glastonbury Abbey by fire in 1184, an interpolator of William of Malmesbury’s *De antiquitate Glastonie ecclesie* identified this royal island with both Avalon, the legendary resting place of King Arthur, and with Glastonbury itself, which had lain as an isle amidst wetlands prior to the medieval drainage of the Somerset Levels. The identification appears to have been an economically motivated solution to the abbey’s flagging fortunes following the fire, which were revived by the opportune discovery in the abbey grounds of the supposed grave of Arthur and Guinevere in 1191.

Figure 5. Topographic map of Glastonbury amidst the Somerset Levels.



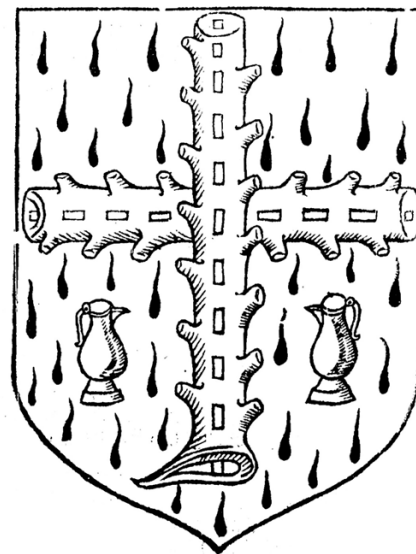
At around the same time that Glastonbury became associated with Avalon, Robert de Boron’s Arthurian romance *Le Roman de l’Etoire dou Graal* first identified Joseph of Arimathea as the bearer of the Holy Grail, portrayed as a vessel from the Last Supper containing the blood of Christ. In 1342 Joseph assumed a central role in Glastonbury legend via John of Glastonbury’s *Cronica sive antiquitates Glastoniensis ecclesie*, which portrayed him as an ancestor of King Arthur and the founder of the aforesaid first British Church described in the Saxon life of St. Dunstan. This church is

described by John as a primitive wattle and daub structure, and is referred to in a spurious prophecy attributed to a Celtic bard by the name of Melkin, a predecessor of Merlin:

The Island of Avalon, eager for the death of pagans, at the burial of them all will be decorated beyond the others in the world with the soothsaying spheres of the prophecy, and in the future will be adorned with those who praise the Most High. Abbadare, powerful in Saphat, most noble of the pagans, took his sleep there with 104,000 men. Among these Joseph of Arimathea received eternal slumber in a marble tomb, and he lies on a divided line next to the oratory's southern corner where the wickerwork is constructed above the mighty and venerable Maiden, and where the aforesaid thirteen spheres rest. Joseph has with him in the sarcophagus two white and silver vessels, full of the blood and sweat of the prophet Jesus. Once his sarcophagus is discovered, [he] will be visible, whole and undecayed, and open to the whole world. From then on those who dwell in that noble island will lack neither water nor the dew of heaven.

**Here begynneth the lyfe of Joseph of Armathia.**

Figure 6. The coat of arms of Glastonbury Abbey, depicting the cruets, holy thorn and blood of Christ. From *The Lyfe of Joseph of Armathia* (1520).



It is notable that the Grail has been substituted in this text with two vessels containing the blood and sweat of Jesus – these are the cruets portrayed on the coat of arms of Glastonbury Abbey. The medieval inventories of Glastonbury Abbey's relics do not list these vessels, which appear to be of a purely imaginative character; but the transfiguring power of their contents, apparent in the allusion to the heavenly manna and the undecayed state of the body of Joseph, would become the basis for their later association with the red and white Philosophers' Stones, the alchemical agents of



transmutation. It is also noteworthy that the Melkin prophecy's motif of a millennialist restoration contingent upon the opening of a tomb bearing a transfigured corpse bears an important resemblance to more narrowly esoteric motifs, most notably the opening of the tombs of Hermes Trismegistus and Christian Rosenkreutz.



Figures 7 and 8. Joseph of Arimathea and the two cruets. Church of All Saints, Langport, c. 1500 (left); Church of St. John the Baptist, Glastonbury, 1935 (right).

However, the history of esotericism proper in Glastonbury begins after the destruction of its abbey by Henry VIII in 1539, at which time the last abbot was hung, drawn and quartered upon the Tor. In his *Theatrum chemicum Britannicum* (1651) Elias Ashmole writes:

‘Tis generally reported that Doctor Dee, and Sir Edward Kelly were so strangely fortunate, as to finde a very large quantity of the Elixir in some part of the Ruines of Glastenbury-Abbey.

This is evidently a piece of folklore, as Dee's diaries only mention that Edward Kelley was directed by spirits to Northwick Hill in the Cotswolds, where he

discovered a “boke of magik and alchimie” attributed to St. Dunstan, a “red congealed” powder within a “hollow stone” and a cipher scroll detailing the location of ten buried treasure troves. We are dealing here specifically with esoteric folklore of a kind common throughout early modern Europe, as high magical and alchemical motifs were incorporated into oral folk tradition, from whence they often exercised a reciprocal influence on esoteric lore proper. Some insight into the exact process by which Dee’s account of the unearthing of the elixir became associated with Glastonbury can be garnered from a variation of the story given in 1671 by Daniel Morhof, who writes that Kelley was passing through an unnamed town on his return from Wales to England when he found a book written in “ancient Welsh” in a trader’s shop window. Inquiring as to its provenance, Kelley learnt the trader and other commoners had taken the opportunity granted by the Reformation to plunder the tomb of a bishop in search of treasure – but all they had discovered, to their disappointment, was the book along with two ivory spheres containing white and red powders. Kelley promptly paid one pound for these items and returned with them to Dee’s house at Mortlake.

Given its reference to the post-Reformation plundering of *two* vessels with red and white powders, Morhof’s account appears to conflate the story of the unearthing of Kelley’s red elixir and Book of St. Dunstan in the Cotswolds with the opening of the tomb of St. Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury. As the prophecy of Melkin had specified the location of that tomb at “a divided line next to the oratory’s southern corner”, its exact whereabouts remained a subject for popular speculation; indeed, during his stay at Glastonbury in October of 1750, Bishop Pococke heard of the unearthing of a body thought to be that of Joseph, whose relics continued to exercise a powerful hold upon the religious imagination:

For they say that Joseph of Arimathea brought with him two vials of water and blood, the washing of our Saviour’s wounds, which were kept in a square niche on the north side of the high altar, from which niche the Papists have scraped away the free stone and broken off pieces of a harder stone at bottom to carry it away out of devotion.

In the wake of the Reformation the destruction of the abbey remnants continued apace, principally at the hands of certain local landholders, who had a reputation for possessing an iconoclastic Protestant spirit, and who regularly plundered the ruins for





Figure 9. Glastonbury and its ruined abbey in the mid-seventeenth century.  
Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, I, 1655.

building material. In the 1720's the antiquarian William Stukeley lamented the "barbarous havoc" wreaked by a "Presbyterian tenant" upon the remnants of St. Joseph's Chapel; and just as the attempted destruction of the Glastonbury Thorn had engendered tales of divine vengeance visited upon the perpetrators, so too the desecration of the abbey ruins gave rise to popular narratives of sacrilege and retribution directed principally against the instrumental rationality of the Calvinistically oriented Protestant Dissenters. Thus the eighteenth century decline in the Glastonbury economy was widely blamed upon the building of a new market house with stone from the abbey ruins.



Figure 10.  
Aerial/topographic map of Glastonbury showing central sites in its sacred landscape.



Esoteric religion at Glastonbury emerges from this resacralizing, folk Anglican response to the desecration of Glastonbury's sacred tradition and landscape in the course of the Long Reformation. The symbolic focal point of this re-enchantment was the transfiguring blood of Christ, a mediating power mending the rift between spiritual Creator and earthly Creation, and its dual focus in the sacred landscape was the tomb of St. Joseph and the Chalice Well. The latter is to be found upon a sloping hill beside the Tor where the last abbot was thought to have been executed. Its iron-rich waters leave a reddish deposit upon the rock – hence its association with the Chalice, the cup used at the Last Supper by Christ, who proclaimed “this is my blood”. This association is at least as old as the eighteenth century, as Pococke's 1750 account names the sloping hill beside the Tor as Chalice Hill; what is more, in 1724 Stukeley had already noted a local belief in the existence of an arched subterranean passageway between this well and the chapel of St. Joseph at the abbey ruins below. In Stukeley's day the chapel crypt was flooded; however, in 1825 another well was discovered at its southeastern corner, concealed beneath an elaborate medieval Gothic archway. In accordance with the antiquarian, museum-keeping ethos of the current Anglican administration of the abbey ruins, the significance of St. Joseph's Well within Glastonbury's esoteric lore is entirely disregarded, and it remains unsigned and closed off by an iron gate due to health and safety regulations.



Figure 11. St. Joseph's Well,  
Glastonbury Abbey.

There is no record of a medieval cult relating to either the Chalice Well or the Well of St. Joseph; the Chalice Well first comes to prominence only in October of 1750, when a local asthmatic by the name of Matthew Chancellor was directed by an angel in a dream to drink from its waters, which at that time ran in a partially subterranean conduit to the chain gate at the abbey. According to the angel, the waters possessed curative power due to the “vast number of saints and martyrs” buried in the holy ground there; this is another mythologem with folkloric roots, which are also evident in an earlier eighteenth century account of a bloody spring that emerged at the house of a farmer who had participated in the murder of the last abbot. News of Chancellor’s dream and subsequent cure led to tens of thousands of visitors flocking to the waters of the Chalice Well, which is also referred to in contemporary accounts as the Blood Spring and the Spring of Joseph of Arimathea. The water was even bottled en masse and sold at the Universal Register Office in London; however, the unsanitary condition of the conduit led to deaths and a rapid decline in custom, while the bathhouse built in anticipation of a permanent reversal of Glastonbury’s ebbing fortunes soon fell into disuse.



Figures 12 and 13. The “Cup of Peace”, as depicted by Mary Tudor Pole (left); the discovery of the cup, *Daily Express*, 26 July 1907 (right).

The resurgence of the Chalice Well and the dawn of contemporary esotericism at Glastonbury can be traced to a curious event of September 1906, when a clairvoyant by the name of Katharine Tudor Pole uncovered a mysterious glass vessel from the mud of a sluice near Wearyall Hill, subsequently named St. Bride’s Well. Her brother, Wellesley Tudor Pole, an associate of the Golden Dawn, claimed he had seen the place in a “waking dream” and directed her there along with two of her friends, who together formed a “triad of maidens” necessary for the unearthing of the holy relic.

Despite contemporary newspaper accounts proclaiming the discovery of the Holy Grail and the downfall of the materialistic science of the Victorian age, the finding was less than miraculous, given that Tudor Pole knew the man who had placed the object at the sluice in the first place – John Goodchild, who had paid six pounds for it in a Ligurian tailor’s shop. Goodchild was a spiritual disciple of William Sharp, the Golden Dawn member writing under the name of Fiona Macleod; and while late Victorian medievalism was a decisive influence, it is also in the context of the Celtic revival promoted by Sharp and W. B. Yeats that the rise of esoteric Glastonbury should be understood. Thus Goodchild in his turn had been told in a vision he must place this Chalice at “the women’s quarter” at Glastonbury so that its discovery would serve as a “means of moulding Christian thought”, i.e. of restoring the cult of the earth mother to patriarchal Christianity.

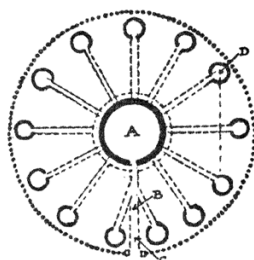


Figure 12: 'The Circular Chapel Ring of Cells'

- A. St Joseph's Circular Chapel (AD 37).
- B. The Forked Paths (*linea bifurcata*). Traditional burial place of Joseph.
- C. Site of Arthur's grave, between the pyramids.
- D. Site of one of the XII cells, marking the eastward boundary of the Vetusta Ecclesia (see Fig. 13).

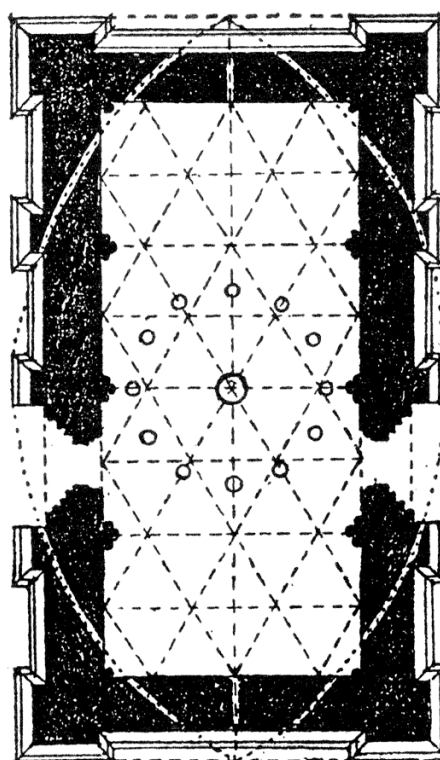


Figure 14: 'Chapel of St Mary the Virgin: Glaston'

Figure 14. The *vesica* of the Lady Chapel (right) and the thirteen 'spheres' from the prophecy of Melkin (left); note the *linea bifurcata* marking St. Joseph's tomb. From Frederick Bligh Bond, *The Mystery of Glastonbury* (1930).

The coming of the so-called Avalonians to Glastonbury created difficulties for the Anglican Church hierarchy from the outset. Archdeacon Wilberforce, Canon of Westminster, initially declared Goodchild's cup to be the Holy Grail itself, only to be



contradicted by an expert consensus that it was “fairly modern”. More serious difficulties arose due to the Church’s appointment in 1908 of Frederick Bligh Bond as director of excavations at its newly acquired site, Glastonbury Abbey. Bligh Bond was also a friend of Goodchild’s, and declared himself to be the first man to apply “psychical research methods to archaeological work” – through the automatic writing of mediums he made contact with the so-called Watchers or “Company of Avalon”, spirits of the Glastonbury dead who directed him to undiscovered structures amidst the abbey ruins. These had been constructed in accordance with the “aeonial” or archetypal rules of *gematria*, which Bligh Bond extrapolated not from Kabbalistic sources but rather from the pre-Kabbalistic isopsephy of the Gnostics. In accordance with Goodchild’s British Israelite beliefs, Bligh Bond portrayed the druids as the lost tribe of Israel who had conveyed this *prisca sapientia* to the British Isles, and whose legacy was readily discernible in the cryptic description of St. Joseph’s Chapel given in the prophecy of Melkin. Bligh Bond placed particular emphasis on the form of the feminine *vesica* or yoni underlying the proportions of the Lady Chapel that superseded St. Joseph’s Chapel; it was a design he also incorporated into a wrought-iron cover for the Chalice Well, which had been acquired by the feminist and Christian socialist Alice Buckton in 1912. To this day it continues to constitute Glastonbury’s most potent symbol for the reinstatement of the feminine within the religion of the West.



Figures 15 and 16. The Chalice Well (left): wrought-iron cover with *vesica piscis* design created by Frederick Bligh Bond c. 1918; Alice Buckton (below) teaching in 1915.



Then as now, the Anglican Church hierarchy was less than enamoured with this late flowering of the druidic *prisca theologia*. Unconvinced by Bligh Bond's esoteric archaeology, the Diocese of Bath and Wells duly terminated his appointment in 1923. Yet Bligh Bond's ideas were far from new – in his work of 1741, *Stonehenge, A Temple Restor'd to the British Druids*, William Stukeley himself had argued for the Jewish patriarchal origins of the druids, and had perceived their sacred geometry in the circles of Stonehenge, which he correlated with the architecture of the temple of Solomon. Stukeley drew in his turn upon a post-Reformation English discourse asserting the primacy of a primitive British apostolic Church over and against the Romish faith brought to the British Isles in the sixth century by Saint Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury. Thus Jacobean writers such as Bishop Francis Godwin and the antiquarian William Camden had argued a Druidic *prisca theologia* paved the way for Christianity in Britain, citing as proof Origen's alleged statement that the Britons of the second century AD were already Christians. As the legendary site of Joseph of Arimathea's first church, Glastonbury held a special place in this national mythology; indeed, in the course of the eighteenth century the notion arose that Joseph had chosen Glastonbury precisely because it lay at the very heart of Druidic worship in Britain, surrounded by stone circles that constituted microcosmic models of the heliocentric Pythagorean macrocosm of the druids.

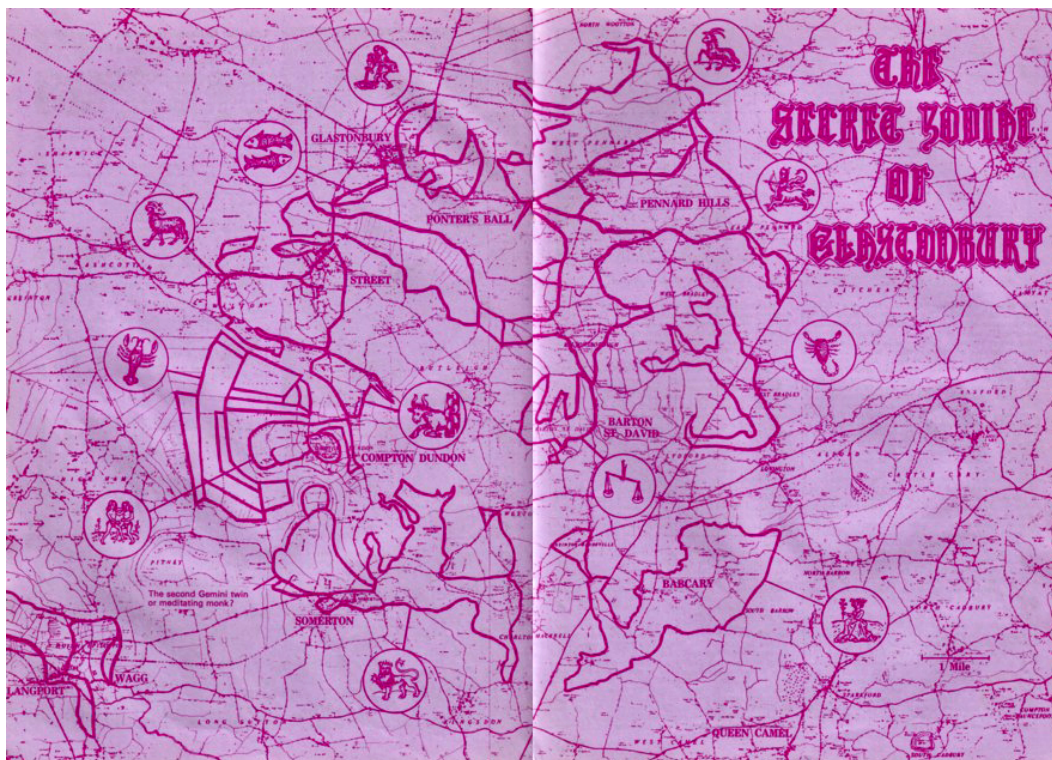


Figure 17. The Glastonbury Zodiac, as depicted in *Gandalf's Garden* magazine (1969)

One of the most intriguing pieces of esoteric pseudo-history from Glastonbury to have infiltrated the scholarly literature regards a similar archaeological over-interpretation. In a book of 1968 entitled *John Dee*, Richard Deacon stated that Dee had made a map of the prehistoric earthworks in the Glastonbury area, and that he had interpreted them as the constellations of the Zodiac plotted out upon the ground. The map in question was said by Deacon to reside at the Warburg Institute; yet it mysteriously disappeared soon after his sighting of it, and despite a prolonged search has not been seen since. This alleged disappearance has itself become further evidence of a supernatural conspiracy in the eyes of contemporary neo-pagans at Glastonbury; nevertheless, the quoted passage Deacon supplies is clearly a poor attempt at the fabrication of early modern English, and his pseudo-history is merely an elaboration upon the Glastonbury Zodiac theory of the Theosophically-inclined artist Katherine Maltwood, who in 1929 first perceived this immense terrestrial Zodiac in aerial survey maps of the area. According to Maltwood, who was illustrating the 13<sup>th</sup> century *High History of the Holy Grail* at the time, the Glastonbury Zodiac had been constructed by Sumerians in 3000 BC and represented stages in the quest for the Grail itself.

There is no time now to give more than the most cursory overview of the history of esotericism at Glastonbury; however, hopefully I have given you some idea of the major themes in my ongoing research on this topic, and I would like to conclude by mentioning certain problems that have arisen thus far that I wish to address in the coming year. Some of these problems pertain specifically to the subject of Glastonbury and British esotericism, principally the contribution of British Israelite thought to the rise of esoteric Glastonbury. While the origins of British Israelism proper can be traced to the early nineteenth century and writers such as John Wilson and Edward Hine, the relationship of their work to earlier post-Reformation narratives concerning the lost Semitic tribe of the British and the Druidic *prisca theologia* is clearly of central import to an understanding of the history of esotericism at Glastonbury. Of particular interest is the legend of Christ's visit to Glastonbury, and his building of the first British church there, which as we may recall descended from on high like the New Jerusalem. While this legend is associated with British Israelite circles in the later nineteenth century, a variation has been found dating to the mid-eighteenth century, and a considerable role in its propagation was played by Blake's poem of 1808, which has become something of a second national anthem for the English:



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?

Another pressing problem I wish to address with this research, and an important task facing our field overall, pertains to the role of psychological factors in the genesis of esoteric belief and practice. The esoteric mindset as defined by Faivre corresponds in many particulars with what may be termed an 'esoteric schizotypy', in accordance with a contemporary psychiatric category encompassing a broad spectrum of personalities exhibiting schizotypal traits (e.g. visual and auditory hallucinations, paranoid or conspiratorial ideation, a tendency to distant associations); of particular significance in this regard is the phenomenon of 'apophenia', the discovery of meaningful patterns in apparently random data that we find exemplified in the creative interpretations of Glastonbury's sacred landscape I have touched upon today.

Finally, there is also the problem of academic access to esoteric sources. I had been hoping to inspect the archives of the Chalice Well Trust, but I was told the general public is not yet ready for the details of the magical warfare waged against Hitler by the Avalonians Wellesley Tudor Pole and Dion Fortune, apparently with the connivance of Winston Churchill himself. So this particular theme, be it esoteric fact or pseudo-history, must await another talk.