

Glastonbury Water

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THE literary and historical associations of Glastonbury have been of unusual force and interest since the early Middle Ages, and even in the materialistic eighteenth century were found to have a certain practical value, when the water obtained from the spring situated between the Tor Hill and Chalice Hill, Glastonbury, was used for therapeutic purposes.

The spring had been known as the Blood or Chalice Well, and people were wont to use the water from the higher spring for domestic purposes. In the Middle Ages the people of Glastonbury paid little attention to this water. However, in 1750, the inhabitants seem suddenly to have become very excited over its efficacy. In October of that year Matthew Chancelor, of North Wootton, afflicted with asthma and other troubles, and having dreamt that a person told him what course to pursue, went to Glastonbury on seven successive Sunday mornings, and 'realized that he was cured from his ailments'. Chancelor made oath (on 27 April 1751) before Thomas White, mayor of Glastonbury, and R. Blake, justice, that he had been cured.¹

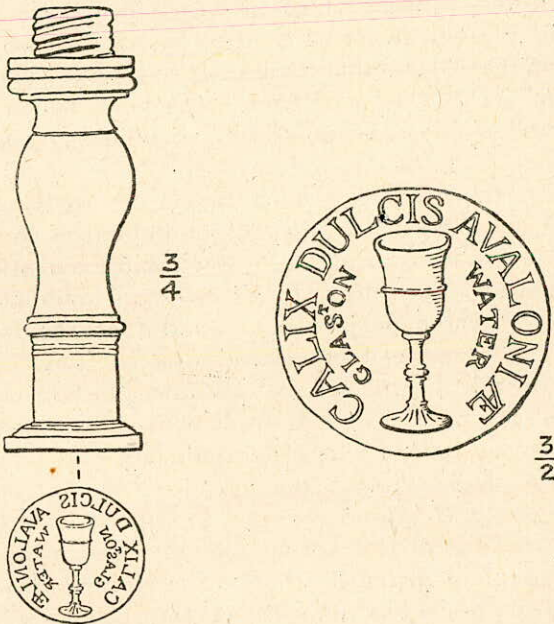
This case was mentioned by Richard Gough in his diary, under 30 April 1751; he wrote, 'it brought numbers of people from all parts of the kingdom to drink these *miraculous waters* for various distempers, and many were healed, and great numbers received benefit'.²

On 5 May 1751, says the *Gentleman's Magazine*, ten thousand people came to Glastonbury, from Bristol, Bath and other places, to drink the waters; and a pamphlet was written on the subject. For Glastonbury, of course, this pilgrimage proved for the time very lucrative. The water was sent away in sealed bottles and sold at apothecaries in the Strand.

¹ The particulars of this dream were printed as a broad-sheet, and the text is given in full in *Somerset & Dorset Notes & Queries*, v. 355.

² Chambers' *Book of Days*, 1869, vol. i, 564.

The seal used for the purpose, which came into the collection of William Stradling, of the Priory, Chilton Polden, has now been acquired by the Somerset County Museum. Attached to it was an old parchment label inscribed: 'The seal used for sealing the bottles containing "The Glastonbury Water" when in repute, A.D. 1750.'



Seal used for Sealing Bottles of "Glastonbury Water,"
A.D. 1750.

The circular seal, which is $\frac{1\frac{5}{8}}$ in. in diameter, bears the inscription, **CALIX. DULCIS. AVALONIAE. = GLASTON. WATER.** In the field, a cup or chalice of a slender Puritanical form—presumably intended for the Holy Grail (*see accompanying illustration*).

In this connection it might be stated here that Glastonbury Abbey would have nothing to do with the Grail itself. It appears, however, that there was a set of secular traditions at Glastonbury inspired by The Golden Legend in Sir Thomas Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*, which was probably not countenanced

by the monks. For instance, the legend of Pons Perilis, referred to by Leland, may be cited.

Dr. J. Armitage Robinson went into some details upon this subject in *Two Glastonbury Legends*, and on page 39 he sums up by saying, 'All this is in harmony with the fact that the Holy Grail was purely an invention of the romances, and never at any time received ecclesiastical sanction. It was probably felt that the very conception was inconsistent with the reverence due to the Blessed Sacrament. Be that as it may, the fact remains that the Glastonbury tradition to the very end, though it borrowed what it wanted from "the book which is called *The Holy Grail*", makes no claim, no allusion even, to the Grail itself.'

After this digression we must revert to the Glastonbury Water. A pump-room*, or spa, was built for the convenience of those who came to drink the waters, and excavations were made for baths. The influx of visitors created a great demand for lodgings. These people soon found that the water had nothing in it to make it especially curative, and the crowds gradually dwindled; in fact, before a decade had passed the spring lost its repute and the place became deserted. A therapeutical system of this kind could not last long.³

Mr. H. W. Kille wrote a paragraph on the subject in the *Somerset County Herald Notes and Queries*.⁴ In it he says, 'Tradition records of this spring that it issued from the spot at which Joseph of Arimathea buried the Holy Grail. Tinged, it was said, with the Saviour's Blood, the spring was a copious one, averaging about 22,000 (*sic*) gallons daily, and leaving near its source a deposit of iron (oxide), which covered any object placed in the water, and also the stones over which it passed for a distance of two hundred feet or more.'

Southey preserves for us, in his *Common-place Book*, a curious example of the cases. A young man, witnessing the performance of *Hamlet* at Drury Lane Theatre, was so frightened at sight of the ghost, that 'a humour broke out upon him, which settled in the king's evil'. After all medicines had failed he came to the Glastonbury waters, and they effected a

³ Some of the above notes have been taken from *Wells and Glastonbury*, by Chancellor T. Scott Holmes, 1908.

⁴ See W. G. Willis Watson's *Calendar*, 1920.

thorough cure. 'Faith healed the ailment which fear had produced.'⁵

Another case is that of Elizabeth, wife of William Moggridge, a former vicar of Minehead, who in 1791, tried the curative properties of this spring; she took a course, and was fully cured.

Prebendary Hancock in the *History of Minehead* records the case of Honor, wife of Charles Powel, of Minehead, weaver, with a bleeding cancer in her left hand; she found quick relief and was entirely healed by the Glastonbury waters.

Similar treatment was sufficient to root out a leprosy from which Mary Benet, of Street, suffered, and two glasses of the water are said to have removed a cancer on the tongue of Mrs. Hacker, of Somerton. 'A clergyman who visited the spring in April 1751, stated that he could not get within 30 feet of the place for the multitude of horse and foot surrounding it.'

The *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1838, pt. i, pp. 367-8,⁶ publishes an advertisement in the attempt to make Glastonbury a watering-place; it appeared in the *Gloucester Journal*, 3 June 1752.

'Glastonbury, 16 June. To the Public—

'The waters in this town are almost cover'd all along the roadway, and the rest is intended to be done as soon as possible; and a commodious pump-house and baths to be erected, with other conveniences, in the neatest manner, for the use of those that come to drink the waters. All persons willing to encourage so good a work are desir'd to send their names and benefactions to either of the printers of the following newspapers: viz., the *Daily Advertiser*, *St. James' Evening Post*, or the *Bath, Bristol, Gloucester, Salisbury, or Sherborne Journals*, where the same will be register'd; and all persons subscribing five shillings shall have a ticket to entitle them to the free use of the said conveniences for the first season; and, where larger sums are given, more tickets proportionably will be allow'd and made transferable. An assembly-room is preparing, and will soon be finish'd. Yesterday an account was taken of the strangers that lately arrived and continue in town to drink the waters,

⁵ Chambers' *Book of Days*, 1869, vol. i, 564.

⁶ See G. L. Gomme, *Gentleman's Magazine Library*, 1898, pp. 262-3.

the number of whom amounted to 114, besides a greater number that lodge in the neighbouring villages.'

This is followed by records of the cures of various named individuals, and the closing paragraphs inform us that 'Further information may be had by applying to Anne Galloway, from Bath, late Shopkeeper in Cheltenham, now in Glastonbury, by whom the cases of those that have received benefits, sign'd by their own hands, will be receiv'd; and where all persons, wanting to buy or sell, lett or rent, estates or lodgings, or to put out or take up money, or that want apprentices or servants, as also servants, etc., wanting places, may have their business register'd for one shilling each, and the earliest account sent them.—All letters post-paid will be duly answer'd, and none receiv'd without.

'A large, commodious house, pleasantly situated near the Abby, with five rooms on a floor, will be completely finish'd, and ready to let for lodgings in about a fortnight or three weeks, by the aforesaid Anne Galloway.'