

## Session 2: Tales of Wandlebury and the Gog Magog Hills

Extracts from A Paper read by Mr Arthur Gray on the Wandlebury Legend.

" In England, at the boundary of the diocese of Ely, there is a town named Cantabrica, in the neighbourhood of which there is a place called Wandlebiria, from the fact that the Wandali, when ravaging Britain and savagely murdering the Christians, placed their camp there. Now, where they pitched their tents on the hill-top, there is a level space surrounded with entrenchments and with a single entrance, like a gate. There is a very ancient tradition, attested by popular report, that if a warrior enters this level space at the dead of night, when the moon is shining, and cries ' Knight to knight, come forth,' immediately he will be confronted by a warrior, armed for fight, who, charging horse to horse, either dismounts his adversary or is dismounted. But I should state that the warrior must enter the enclosure alone, though his companions may look on from outside. As proof of the truth of this I quote a story told to me by the country people of the neighbourhood.

There was in Greater Britain, not many days ago, a knight redoubtable in arms and possessed of every noble quality, among the barons second in power to few, to none in worth. His name was Osbert, son of Hugh. One day he came as a guest to the town I have mentioned, and, it being winter time, after supper, as is the fashion with great folk, he was sitting in the evening by the fireside in the family of his wealthy host, and listening to tales of exploits of ancient days; and while he gave ear to them it chanced that one of the people of the country mentioned the wondrous legend aforesaid. The brave man resolved to make personal trial of the truth of what he was told. So he selected one of his noble squires, and, attended by him, went to the place. In complete armour he came to the appointed spot, mounted his steed, and, dismissing his attendant, entered the camp alone. He cried aloud to discover his opponent, and in response a knight, or what looked like a knight, came forth to meet him, similarly armed, as it seemed.

Well, with shields advanced and levelled lances they charged, and each horseman sustained his opponent's shock. But Osbert parried the spearthrust of his antagonist, and with a powerful blow struck him to the ground. He was on his feet again in an instant, and, seeing that Osbert was leading off his horse by the bridle, as the spoils of conquest, he poised his lance and, hurling it like a javelin, with a violent effort he pierced Osbert's thigh. Our knight however in the exultation of his victory either did not feel or did not regard the wound, and his adversary having disappeared, he came out of the camp victorious, and gave the horse which he had won to his squire. It was tall, active and beautiful to behold. He was met on his return by a number of the family, who marvelled at the tale, were delighted at the overthrow of the knight, and loudly applauded the bravery of this illustrious baron. When Osbert took off his arms and discarded his iron greaves he saw one of them filled with clotted blood. The family were amazed at the wound, but the knight scorned fear. The neighbours, aroused from slumber, came thronging together, and their growing marvel induced them to keep watch. As evidence of the victory the horse was kept, still tethered. It was displayed to public view with

its fierce eyes, erect neck and black mane; its knightly saddle and all its trappings were likewise black. At cockcrow the horse, prancing, snorting and pawing the earth, suddenly burst the reins that held it and regained its native liberty. It fled, vanished, and none could trace it. And our noble knight had a perpetual reminder of the wound which he had sustained, in that each year, as the same night returned, the wound, though apparently cured and closed, opened again. So it came about that the famous warrior, some years later, went over sea, and, after performing many deeds of valour against the heathen, by God's will ended his days."

"As King William the Bastard drew near the mountains and valleys of Wales he saw a large town, formerly enclosed within high walls, which was entirely pillaged and burnt. Underneath the town, in a plain, he caused his tents to be pitched, and there he remained that night. Then the king enquired of a Briton what the town was called, and how it was thus destroyed. 'Sire,' said the Briton, 'I will tell you. The castle was formerly called Castle Bran, but now it is called the Old March. There formerly came into this country Brutus, a very brave knight, and Coryneus, from whom Cornwall had its name, and many others derived from the lineage of Troy. No one inhabited these regions excepting very vile people, great giants, whose king was named Geomagog. They heard of the arrival of Brutus, and marched against him; but in the end all the giants were killed except Geomagog, who was wonderfully tall. The valiant Coryneus said that he would like to wrestle with Geomagog to try his strength. At the first bout the giant hugged Coryneus so tight that he broke three of his ribs. Coryneus grew angry; he gave Geomagog such a kick that he fell from a great rock into the sea, and then was Geomagog drowned. A spirit from the devil forthwith entered into Geomagog's body, and he came into these parts, and defended the country for a long time, so that no Briton dared inhabit it.

A long time after this King Bran, the son of Donwal, rebuilt the town, repaired the walls, and cleared out the great ditches, and made a fortress and a great market-place. And the devil came by night, and carried off all that was within; since which time no one has dwelt there.' "

Then follows the nocturnal visit of Payn Peverel to the ghostly city, his combat with Geomagog and his victory, all told in much the same way as the story of Osbert at Wandlebury.

The whole story of Fulk Fitzwarin makes no pretence of being historical. Yet curiously the Payn Peverel who is the hero in this part of it and the counterpart of Osbert in the tale of Gervase is an actual personage and famous in Cambridge history as the benefactor of Barnwell Priory, who gave the Austin canons the site of their house by Barnwell springs. Both the Fitzwarin story and the Barnwell Memoranda mention that his son and heir was named William, and William died, like Osbert, while on a crusade. It is true that Payn died in England — at the Peak in Derbyshire according to the romance, in London according to the Memoranda — but the Barnwell chronicler says that he was standard-bearer of the Conqueror's son, Robert Curthose, in the crusades. But the coincidence of his connection with the Welsh legend and with Cambridge may be dismissed as fortuitous.

In the tale of Fulk Fitzwarin, which presents such unmistakable features of affinity with the

Wandlebury legend, the defeated warrior is the giant Geomagog. A tradition later than the times of Gervase of Tilbury undoubtedly connected the Wandlebury camp with Gogmagog. Layer says that formerly there was a gigantic figure cut in the turf on the Gogmagog Hills, similar to the Long Man of Willington in Sussex. In the name of Gogmagog we light on a tradition not indigenous to Cambridgeshire, nor of an origin ultimately Celtic. Though the tale of the haunted town and the fight with its ghostly warder seems to be genuinely British and ancient, the writer borrowed the name of Geomagog and the wrestling with Coryneus from Geoffrey of Monmouth, who wrote his *Historia Britonum* at some time before 1147. While there is no doubt that Geoffrey incorporated in his book much genuine British tradition it is equally certain that he "contaminated" his story with audacious fictions drawn largely from literary sources ; and the name of Geomagog, or Goemagot, as he spells it, is unquestionably a foreign interpolation in a tale which may otherwise be genuinely Celtic. The traditional scene of the combat of Coryneus with Goemagot is the Hoe at Plymouth. I do not know what credit to attach to Geoffrey's statement that in his day it was still called Lamgoemagot, or Goemagot's Leap.

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