

THE INN SIGN OF THE "MERLIN'S CAVE"
AT CHALFONT ST. GILES, BUCKS.

BY CHARLES HAROLD EVELYN WHITE, F.S.A.

It was only recently, while passing through the pleasant Buckinghamshire village of Chalfont St. Giles, I became aware of the fact that the memory of the ancient Welsh prophet and enchanter, Merlin, was perpetuated in an inn sign, which swings aloft to-day amidst the pleasant tranquillity of rural surroundings. Being a comparative stranger in the locality, I not unnaturally asked for information respecting the origin of the sign, so strangely, as it then appeared to me, appropriated by a roadside inn. No satisfactory answer being forthcoming, I was induced to make some slight investigation, which has resulted in my bringing together a few stray notes respecting the sign and what may have led to its adoption.

It was towards the period of the decline of the ancient British power, and while the native race was still contending with the Saxon invader, that there arose one Marthin, or, as the name has descended to us, *Merlin*. Concerning this individual it may be safe to premise that he lived in an age of myths; it is not, therefore, surprising that the legendary lore relating to him is of a very extraordinary nature, and of as diversified a character as the most requiring could wish, extending over a lengthened period down to the time of our own Poet Laureate, who in his well-known "Idylls of the King," following in the train of Chaucer, Spenser, and others, brings the Celtic prophet prominently to our notice. As the adviser of the great King Arthur, he pictures

"Merlin, who knew the range of all their arts,
Had built the king his havens, ships, and halls,
Was also bard, and knew the starry heavens;
The people call'd him Wizard."

A writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. v., p. 312 ("Of the Occult Philosophy"), in ridiculing the idea of

attributing, as men in days gone by have been only too prone, things beyond their comprehension to an infernal origin, says—"Thus has the great Merlin been treated; he was the son of a nun, the daughter of a King of England, and begot by a Sylph, who brought him up, and made him thorough master of all Arts and Sciences."

The name *Merlin* is, by the Scotch, rendered *Meliar*, and by some has been regarded quite a distinct character from the Cambrian enchanter *Merlin*. Be this as it may, there is a remarkable similarity in all that we know relating to them, and it seems probable that each is peculiar only so far as decked out in native garb. They are distinguished by the epithets respectively of *Merlin Emrys*, or *Ambrosius*, applied to the Welsh prophet, and *Merlin the Wyllt*, or *Merlin Caledonius*. The former is said to have lived in the fifth century, and to have been the offspring of a Welsh princess. The original cave of the prophet in *Dynevor*, near *Carmarthen*, with its strange unearthly noises, its clanging of iron chains, ringing of anvils, striking of hammers, and beating of brazen vessels, was enough to strike terror into the stoutest heart. The secret of these ghastly sounds was declared to be that the enchanter, *Merlin*, was engaged with his spirits in fashioning a brazen wall to encircle the city of *Carmarthen*. *Merlin of Caledonia* is generally thought to have lived in the sixth century, and to have died, as was foretold, by the joint action of earth, wood, and water. The rustics hounded him, and jumping from a rock into the *Tweed*, he was impaled on a stake fixed in the bed of the river. It is, therefore, the first-named *Merlin*, or *Merlin Ambrosius*, who is associated with the cave legend, and may be said, in some way or another, to be commemorated in the inn sign at *Chalfont St. Giles*. *Merlin's* predictions were successively accommodated by the minstrel poets of the Middle Ages to any subject in hand; many such versions are still to be met with. *Warton* says that the metrical and prosaic prophecies attributed to *Merlin* originated with *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, and are numerous and varied.* A speci-

* A metrical *Life and Prophecies of Merlin*, first printed at Frankfurt in 1603, and reprinted for the Roxburghe Club in 1830, has, some think, been wrongly attributed to *Geoffrey of Monmouth*.

men of these prophetic utterances, as given by Geoffrey (*Historia Brittonum*, viii., cap. 4) may be seen in the following extraordinary prediction:—

"Eric shall hide his apples within it, and shall make *subterraneous passages*. At that time shall the stones speak, and the sea towards the Gallic coast be contracted into a narrow space. On each bank shall one man hear another speak, and the soil of the isle shall be enlarged. The secrets of the deep shall be revealed, and Gaul shall tremble for fear."

In these days of cable, telegraphic, and railway communication, the prophecy is not a little remarkable.

Of the inn sign at Chalfont, I can only say that from time immemorial a cave, situate in the orchard at the back of the house, was known by the name of "Merlin's Cave." The inn has certainly been known as "The Merlin's Cave" for at least a century, at which early time, as appears probable, it was the only inn in the place. Of this cave in particular I am able to give no precise information, beyond the bare record of its supposed existence. It would be interesting to learn some further details, although I fear it is too much to suppose it possible. Bearing in mind that we owe to Latin writers what information we possess relating to the Celtic prophet, and, we may suppose, to Geoffrey of Monmouth in particular, and that John Milton was, moreover, especially conversant with the writings of the latter, I am inclined to think, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, that the poet's mind, on hearing the village gossips relate some wonderful occurrences in connection, perhaps, with this cave in the orchard, may have reverted to the legend of Merlin's Cave, near Carmarthen, and so this Chalfont designation may have arisen. The name would then be readily appropriated by the inn afterwards springing up near the spot. In an age of superstition nothing would be more natural. Milton compiled a history of the Saxon period, and it would appear that he was well acquainted with the poetical works of the early writers. It may be also mentioned that the well-known astrologer William Lilly, the English Merlin, was active in the diffusion of his extraordinary predictions during a greater part of the seventeenth century, at a time when the people were singularly credulous and susceptible.

He is known to have assumed the *nom-de-plume* of *Merlinus Anglicus*, and issued a prophetic annual from A.D. 1644 until his death in 1681. He was supposed to be acquainted with the causes of the Great Fire of London of 1666, and for some time was imprisoned on this account. Here, again, we have an insight into circumstances which, not unlikely, may have had something to do with the adoption at Chalfont St. Giles of the designation in question.

Another plausible suggestion is to be found in the following interesting account:—

The *Monthly Intelligencer* of June, 1735 (*Gent. Mag.*, vol. v., p. 331), announced the fact that “A subterraneous building is, by Her Majesty’s order,* carrying on in the Royal Gardens at Richmond,† which is to be called *Merlin’s Cave*, adorned with astronomical figures and characters.”‡ This structure seems to have given rise to very considerable discussion, and it may be in consequence that during this period the name was somewhat widely used as a house sign. There also appear to have been no lack of interpretations of Merlin’s prophecy about this time to all kinds of personal matters and local occurrences. Respecting this “Merlin’s Cave” in Richmond Park, while some regarded it “like the works of the ancient Egyptians, frequently placed in their Royal Gardens and Palaces, wholly hieroglyphical, emblematical, typical, and symbolical, conveying artful lessons of policy to Princes and Ministers of State;” others looked upon it as no better than “an idle whim, a painter’s fancy, a gardener’s gewgaw, a Salmon’s wax-work, a Savoyard’s box, a puppet-show, etc., etc.” The satirical pens of both Pope and Swift were used to bring this extraordinary building into well-merited contempt. George III. seems to have lost no time in sweeping away these “fantastic conceits” of Queen Caroline.

In Chatto’s *History of Signboards*, the sign of “The

* Queen Caroline, the consort of George II.

† In the Lower Park stood the Royal Lodge, the Queen’s favourite residence.

‡ A representation of the interior appears as a frontispiece to Vol. V. of the *Gent. Mag.* (1735). The building itself was thatched, of circular form, and Gothic character. The figures (six) were of wax, gaudily arrayed.

Merlin's Cave" is said to occur in London in Great Audley Street, and in Upper Rosoman Street, Clerkenwell, but it may be that these are of a subsequent date to the inn sign at Chalfont St. Giles, and probably arose in the course of the eighteenth century.

If it had not been for this Buckinghamshire inn sign, we might possibly have lost sight of the interesting bit of local tradition left to us.