

The mystery of the Glastonbury Cross

Just before Christmas 2011 the Heritage Lottery Fund announced a grant of £1.8m for the restoration of Forty Hall Park, Enfield, the site of a Tudor palace and later an 18th-century pleasure garden. Thirty years before, it had been the setting for a bizarre archaeological 'discovery', as Richard Mawrey recounts.

In December 1981 a man called Derek Mahoney turned up at the British Museum and produced what appeared to be the Glastonbury Cross. This artefact, a lead cross inscribed with the words 'HIC IACET SEPULTUS INCLITUS REX ARTHURIUS IN INSULA AVALONIA' was said to have been found on the lid of the coffin of King Arthur when his supposed remains were unearthed by the monks of Glastonbury Abbey in 1191. It has long been disputed whether the 'remains' represented a scam burial by the monks at the time to drum up pilgrimages or whether the burial (though not, of course, of any historical Arthur) was Saxon. The cross remained in existence until at least 1607, when it appeared in the antiquarian William Camden's *Britannia*, so far the only known depiction of it.

Mahoney claimed to have made the find when using a metal detector in the sludge at the bottom of Forty Hall's lake, which had recently been drained for restoration. The British Museum was interested in the cross and asked to be allowed to retain it for examination. Mahoney, however, refused to part with it. His discovery came to the notice of the London Borough of Enfield, which was the owner of Forty Hall Park and thus had legal title to the cross. As a barrister I was instructed by the council to try to get it back. Mahoney was known to be a disturbed individual and a vexatious litigant, filled with intense, though utterly misconceived, grievances, particularly against a number of local estate agents and solicitors. I therefore applied without giving notice of the application for an order for the immediate return of the cross to the council. I obtained a court injunction which was duly served on Mahoney.

Mahoney, however, flatly refused to give up the cross, claiming he had



Above: Forty Hall. Right: the cross as it was reproduced in William Camden's *Britannia*.

hidden it in an 'inert container' (whatever that might be) and no one would find it. Persuasion was useless so, with great reluctance, the council applied to commit Mahoney to prison for contempt of court. Mahoney refused all offers of (free) legal representation and told the judge that he would not hand over the cross until he obtained redress for all his grievances. In April 1982 Mr Justice Croom-Johnson told Mahoney he was committing him to prison for the maximum term of two years but that the moment he delivered up the cross, he would be released. Believing himself a martyr for the cause of his grievances, Mahoney went cheerfully off to prison.

In January 1983 the Official Solicitor intervened on Mahoney's behalf and applied for his release. Mahoney was furious. A surreal hearing occurred before Croom-Johnson in which I argued for the council that he should remain in prison until he produced the cross, the Official Solicitor argued for his release and Mahoney, in person, argued strenuously that it was a gross imposition for the Official Solicitor to claim to represent him and he would rather stay in prison. The application for release failed. This weird scenario was repeated in the Court of Appeal with Mahoney arguing to the last that he should remain inside. The Court of

Appeal decided it had the power and the right to order his release even if he was going to have to be ejected from jail by force. Mahoney was released in March, protesting strongly, but he never produced the cross and his grievances were never rectified. He is believed to have committed suicide, though no one knows when.

Was the cross genuine? If it was a forgery, it was sufficiently convincing for the British Museum not to reject it out of hand. On the other hand Mahoney was a member of the local archaeological society and had worked for a nearby manufacturer of lead toys (thus giving him access to lead and some skill in using it). Given that there is no obvious connection between Glastonbury and Enfield beyond the tenuous fact that Richard Gough, William Camden's editor, lived quite close to Forty Hall, it does seem a very odd artefact to have faked. It also appears that, if Mahoney did produce the cross himself as a means of drawing attention to his legal battles, he made no attempt to use it as a bargaining counter after his release from prison. Did he destroy it to avoid exposure as a faker or did he hide it for some future metal detectorist to find? Thirty years on, we are none the wiser.

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