

## The Healing Cup of Nanteos, Dyfed – Is the Holy Grail in Wales?

Just a few miles outside Aberystwyth, a seaside town on Cardigan Bay in Wales stands a house called Nanteos. Its once-expansive estate has been broken up, and the family most closely associated with it, the Powells, have left. However, the reputation of the house and family continue to attract interest because of a small, badly damaged wooden object which traditions associates with the Holy Grail. The object which has come to be known as the Nanteos cup was first put on public display in 1876 by George Powell, then owner of Nanteos amateur romantic poet and close friend of Swinburne. The event was an exhibition of local antiquities to mark the meeting of the Cambrian Archaeological Society and the occasion was duly written up in the journal *Archeologia Cambrensis*. The drinking from the wooden cup was thought to be the source of cures. People would borrow it and drink from it in the hope of curing illness. However, it was not then associated with the Grail, although a tradition suggested that it might have been made from the True Cross. Another local gentry family had bought nearby Strata Florida Abbey in the seventeenth century and had built a house on the site. This land passed into the possession of the Powells when the two families intermarried. The Abbey ruins became dangerously unstable over time, and in the nineteenth century, George Powell had repairs carried out to make them safe. The appearance of the Nanteos Cup coincided quite closely with these nineteenth-century repairs.

The object in question is a small mazer bowl of the type often used in religious houses for domestic, rather than ecclesiastical, purposes. Mazer bowls are made of various woods; the Nanteos example is wych-elm. Often these bowls have a metal rim to prevent damage, and the Nanteos example does have a groove on its lip, which may have accommodated such a rim. The most likely origin for the object is that it turned up during repairs to Strata Florida Abbey in the nineteenth century and was kept as a curiosity. The damage was noted when it was first exhibited which suggests that it was found in a damaged condition, but the citation in *Archeologia Cambrensis* also records the most enduring tradition connected to it, namely that the damage is the result of pilgrims taking bits to keep as personal relics.

The cup still exists and the present custodians, the descendants of the family who sold Nanteos in the 1960s, treasure it. There are a handful of paper slips, the earliest dates to mid-nineteenth century, recording the name of the borrowers, what was left as a pledge, the date of the return and whether the cure was successful. According to these slips all cures were successful. While this substantiates the idea that it was used as a healing cup, the association with the Holy Grail does not go back much before the beginning of the twentieth century.

There is a lovely story about seven monks from Glastonbury taking refuge at *Strata Florida* during their flight from the rapacity of Henry VIII soon after the Dissolution of the Monasteries. They are given shelter at Strata Florida and pass the Cup to their companions as each one dies. The last survivor monk gave the cup to the Stedman family to keep safe. Unfortunately Strata Florida was never closely linked with Glastonbury and the Stedman family, originally from Staffordshire, cannot be associated with the area before the seventeenth century. Such legends of precious objects being saved from destruction, kept in secret, only to reappear many years later with their miraculous power considerably enhanced, are very common. There is an

alternative legend, that the Cup was at Strata Florida all along, a sacred relic sought by medieval pilgrims to the Abbey, but this story too is a nineteenth-century fiction. The final legend, that Richard Wagner visited the house and wrote *Parsifal* after seeing the cup, was inspired rather by a visit paid to the composer by the romantic owner of the house George Powell who visited his idol and bought back a picture which hung in the house until the furnishings were sold.

Legends however, do not have to be true to be powerful. The Nanteos Cup is not particularly mysterious and its history and origins are clearly detailed in the Powell family correspondence and local sources. However stories about fleeing monks, souvenir hunting pilgrims and Richard Wagner's alleged visit are still given priority in popular accounts. My interest in the Nanteos cup goes back to my student days at Aberystwyth. Many people I spoke to had seen the Cup (Or at least the replica kept by the last Mrs Powell). The house was something of a local landmark, and while it was open to visitors in the 1960s, it was much visited. Very few of the people I spoke to personally took the Holy Grail story seriously, or the tales of monks buried in the cellars of Nanteos, or the tunnel supposedly linking the house with Aberystwyth Castle. Newspapers accounts were more likely to encourage that sort of think I was told. However, there continues to be much speculation that the Cup may be languishing in a bank vault somewhere or has been sold to a rich American. Occasionally somebody knows or knew somebody, most likely an older relative, who had tested the healing properties of the Cup. This is still very much a living legend and one of its most striking features is the continuing connection with the local area. The Holy Grail never existed in the old county of Cardiganshire, but a flourishing folk culture is alive and well.

### Sources

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