

The Byzant, the Town Hall,
the Pocket Borough, and the Grosvenors

Some thoughts on Shaftesbury
past, present and future.

by

Keith Walton

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Author contact: kwalton@brimstonepress.co.uk

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I am standing on the corner, where the Commons turns into the High Street, outside Hambledon estate agents. I am looking south, into the sun, across the High Street. The High Street here is narrow, the width of one vehicle, with a long hump in green brick, traffic calming, creating a safe pedestrian crossing. In front of me is a piazza (there is no adequate English word: market squares are – squares; this is pentagonal, angled but approaching the circular), a fountain, its waters glistening in the sunlight as they leap high, golden, a dazzling vista, an airy space between church and shops, over the vale to the far hills, light and air rushing in from green hills. The High Street here has been dug out so the church is now, once more, at ground level. The gently sloping open space created down to the buildings on Gold Hill is full of market stalls surrounded by shops and cafés. There are seats around the fountain, which in form is strangely familiar. Gazing at this airy, light-filled scene, I suddenly realise how long it is since a bemused visitor to the town has asked – ‘but, where *is* Gold Hill?’, how long since I watched them squeeze between buildings down slippery cobbles to view it, how long since the town’s gem, one of the finest views in all England, that is revealed before me, here, now, was hidden away behind the town hall, how long since this magnificent view was opened up to me, to all of us; how long since the town hall was demolished.

But that is a dream of the future. Now, I am standing on the corner, where the Commons turns into the High Street, outside Hambledon estate agents. I am looking south, across the High Street. On the left is Shaftesbury’s only medieval church (once there were twelve), a low greensand building with a bell tower. Next to it, in front of me, is the town hall, also built of greensand, its parapet level with the church’s, its gothic windows echoing those of the church; a much later building, but designed to match: a harmony of spiritual and temporal power, apparently. But when I cross the road, this vision of harmony begins to change to one of conflict.

For the town hall is set back twenty feet from the High Street’s building line, marked by the church and the shops that the town hall is between. Also, it is on a street level that buries the church several feet down (hence the church’s squat appearance). And, it is built so close to the church’s main entrance, the west door, creating such a steep and restricted access that, until a ramp to the west door was built recently, the way into the church was down steps from the High Street through a

door in the north wall. And when I squeeze between church and town hall, steeply down, and look back up at the south elevation, facing me, the iron bars of what was built as the town lock-up, and soaring more than 30 feet above me (the highest wall in Shaftesbury?), I realise that I am face to face with – a statement. The question is: what is that statement? Fortunately some clues are close by, in the town museum.

Inside, I begin with the maps. This is Shaftesbury's third 'town hall'. It was built in 1827. But from the map I see that the building it replaced was not on this site but parallel to the church, in the High Street. I soon discover the reason: this is the site of the ancient town's market square, with its market cross. Build the town hall *on top of* the market square? What *is* going on?

The old town hall, or guild hall, was demolished in the 1820s to widen the High Street – presumably to allow passage of the new fast commercial stage-coaches, for which much road improvement along the A30 was made, (including the digging out of Tout Hill in 1817), giving, by 1827, journey times to London comparable to the Bath and Exeter mail-coaches. The local worthies then asked Earl Grosvenor to build a new town hall. Why Earl Grosvenor? Because Earl Grosvenor owned the town.

The Grosvenors had grown wealthy in Eighteenth century London by building on land they owned in Mayfair; they were to become even wealthier in the 1830s by developing Belgravia (a fashionable place to live after John Nash rebuilt Buckingham Palace in 1825). The prolonged agricultural depression that began in 1815 with the end of the Napoleonic wars had put many landowners in dire straits, and the entrepreneurs who had made their money in the thriving metropolis could easily outbid the locals for that desirable country residence. (Sounds familiar?) And the ever-improving roads made access easier. (In 1747, the 'Flying Waggon'(!) took five days from Chard to London; by 1837 the 'Telegraph' was galloping from Exeter to London in 17 hours. No doubt their lordships' carriages could match that speed.) So in 1825 the Grosvenors bought Motcombe House (now Port Regis school), with 10,000 acres of land – ie the manor of Gillingham. We'll see the significance of this later.

However there was another attraction to 'going rural' – the unreformed parliamentary system. Five years before, Earl Grosvenor had

bought Shaftesbury, a pocket borough – ie a parliamentary constituency with so few voters that it was ‘in the pocket’ of the landowner, who, effectively, chose the MPs. Shaftesbury was still sending two MPs to Westminster. That was the reason the Grosvenors had bought into the area.

Before I go on, I want to put down my own feelings about Shaftesbury. I have lived here for over 20 years, and I believe now, as I always have, that it is a special place; but that there’s something ‘wrong’, that something ails it. Special, yes – when I first came here my son, 6 years old, would tell me of the ‘purple gelfies’ and ‘green grackles’ that he saw in the trees, and that came, he insisted, from a ‘spaceship’ under our feet. He never had ‘visions’ in any other place. And to stand on Park Walk, on Castle Park, at sunrise or sunset, and feel as if you are on top of the world, in dawn sunshine to gaze out over a dense white sea of fog, to spend a day in the clouds knowing that a hundred feet below all is clear. On Park Walk at night, and feeling as if there, just beyond that rail, is an ocean. To follow each night the pattern of the stars, and to feel that, somehow, that pattern is mirrored down here.... Overactive poetic imagination, perhaps, but many people will tell you that Shaftesbury is, for them, – special. A view shared by Robert Coon, whose work I’ll refer to later (see Appendix 1). But ‘ailing’?

Dark, muffled, lacking resonance, inducing trance, are the words that come to me. Dark, certainly physically, this stone that absorbs light; psychologically too, for some – I have a friend who fled from the place and whose every memory is of darkness; an energy that is deep and dark – not malefic, but slowed, blocked. Inducing trance? I feel Shaftesbury to be under a bell jar – leaving it is like breaking through a glass wall, returning, one is re-absorbed. And I’ve known several people, of high calibre, drawn to Shaftesbury by the place, by Robert Coon’s work, who have fled in short order when feeling themselves succumbing. Muffled, lacking resonance? How can a hundred people attend Robert Coon’s meeting in 1993 when he proclaimed Shaftesbury a Centre of Light, the Will Function in the working through of the Grail mystery, and nothing come of it? How can the best and repeated efforts of many enlightened ones working here achieve so little? This town, like the Fisher King, ails. This town, like a town in a fairy tale, is in a trance. It sleeps. And what put it to sleep? The town hall.

Or, rather, the web of events and actions that surrounded the building of the new town hall. It's complicated, but here goes.

'Clear the streets of medieval clutter! Get rid of that outdated guild hall! Make straight the way for that symbol of progress, the fast coach! We must be modern!' Perhaps they, like councillors at all times (one thinks of the town streets being widened to allow through-traffic in the 1950s, town centres demolished to build shopping precincts in the 1960s, the 'slum' clearances of the 1970s) were only 'being modern'. Or perhaps they were nudged into it by the new 'big wheel' in town – especially when he offered to build a new town hall ('free stuff!'); and, too, they thought of the value of the business of supplying such a large and wealthy new household. Anyway, wasn't this the new era of 'shopping', with shops replacing markets and pedlars, and the new middle classes the ones with the spare cash? Why not offer the prime site in town for his prestigious new town hall? Which would also, of course, amplify *their* prestige as councillors. (Such a view from the council chamber! Such loftiness!) We can easily find a new site for the market traders. Which is true. At the insignificant cost of 'a view'. Which is also, apparently, true. Pass over the Romantic poets who had for a generation been extolling the life-enhancing qualities of the sublime 'view', the landscape designers (eg Flitcroft at nearby Stourhead) who for longer had been demonstrating the virtues of the picturesque 'view' – these are smalltown burghers with short perspectives.

I'm tempted at this point to return to the moment when I was looking up at the south elevation of the town hall, and to turn round, and look at the view. But we must go further before we can go back. Instead, let us return to the museum. Let us go upstairs and look at – the byzant. What to make of this bizarre object? First thought is that it is a version of the mace, symbol of authority. Except that it is too large, elaborate, golden, indeed outlandish to lead a mayor's solemn progress. It has a large base, on which it stands. It is topped not by a crown but a pine cone. Half way up, it spreads outward in overlapping curls for all the world like water in a fountain. Around the disc a scalloped edge. It is hung with ribbons, and decorated with peacock feathers, flowers and foliage. This is the emblem that 'time out of remembrance and mynde', as the Tudor document has it, was each year, in May, decorated with thousands of pounds worth of plate and jewels and paraded down to the springs of Enmore Green and – after symbolic gifts to the lord of the

manor of Gillingham (in whose possession Enmore – part of the tything of Motcombe – was) and a lunch hour of ‘mynstralls, myrth of game, and daunce’ – paraded back (up Tout Hill one presumes, and mazily one imagines – John Michell¹ associates ‘Tout’ with Thoth, the Egyptian form of Hermes) to its sanctuary (in the guild hall? In the church?), having assured the hilltop town of its supply of water for another year. It was called ‘the ceremony of the prize besom’.

‘Time out of mynde’, maybe, but not after 1829. For the ceremony was abruptly discontinued, by agreement of the borough of Shaftesbury and the manor of Gillingham, one man effectively striking a deal with himself – Lord Grosvenor. The council minutes note that it was stopped to save money on ‘feasting and drinking’.

So what do we make of this? Metropolitan moneybags throwing his weight around in his new rural fiefdom? Perhaps – although one must note the happy connivance of the borough worthies: indeed they had refused to hand over the bread, ale, gloves and calf’s head earlier in the century; the Motcombites had responded by blocking the springs! Enlightenment men bringing modern utilitarian ideas to the benighted rustics? Possibly – that would certainly apply to local printer and activist John Rutter. Fear that rural discontent might, on such an occasion, and with such a central meeting place available, turn to direct action? This seems more plausible. Cobbett’s *Rural Rides* in the 1820’s (he came within 10 miles of Shaftesbury) describe a rural economy devastated. The rural labourers had had it tough for decades – for in the agricultural boom years of the French wars (1789 to 1815) they had to pay sky-high prices for bread, and in the long slump since there was a shortage of work, both in agriculture and in the cottage industries now being replaced by factory production in the new industrial towns. Dorset labourer’s wages were the lowest in the country. 1834 was the year of the martyrs of Tolpuddle, 15 miles away.

But, this is all a long time ago – what has it got to do with now? It depends on whether you believe in urban design, feng shui, earth mysteries, sacred sites, astro-archeology, spirit of place, the legacy of history.... If any or all of these interest you, read on.

But first, ignoring all this arcane stuff, let’s be practical. Think – tourism. Demolish the town hall. There are plenty of precedents for knock-

¹ *View over Atlantis* p48

ing down buildings for the view – at Milton Abbas a whole village was demolished. And, these days, tourism is an industry, and views sell. Re-develop the Grosvenor Hotel (another of Grosvenor’s buildings) for Council and public use, plus new residential accomodation to pay for it. I’d guess, anyway, that the stone from the town hall would be worth a few bob; and an opened-up Gold Hill would soon generate enough extra tourism to pay for the venture, as well as energising the town. For the practical, job done; for those with wider, deeper interests, the story resumes.

My hypothesis is this: that, whether consciously or unconsciously, the actions of 1827 and 1829 (a fine irony that Grosvenor built the new town hall just before the 1832 Reform Act that marked the beginning of the end for the old parliamentary system, the pocket borough, that had brought him here in the first place) marked a break that has cut off Shaftesbury from its environment, its past, and from the energy that comes with such connections. Maybe it was just a ‘sign of the times’ – the changeover from a rural, traditional world to an industrial, ‘progressive’ one. Maybe it was the deliberate suppression of traditional power by new power – one of the standard ways of establishing a new power is to put *your* buildings on *their* sites. There *are* ways of connecting new to old – John Wood’s rebuilding of Bath on ‘ancient’ principles, Beckford at Fonthill. Coon sees it, and the collapse of Beckford’s tower at Fonthill in 1825, as signs of the decline of the energy of the Romantic movement, which he sees as a premature attempt to build the New Jerusalem. But Shaftesbury *chose* to break with the past. At great cost, I maintain, to its health.

In 1827 the town hall was built on the town’s market square. In 1829 the byzant ceremony was discontinued. With these two acts, Shaftesbury was cut off from its past, disconnected from earth energies. It lost its history, its mythology, its symbols; its sense of itself. It became mundane.

There is some evidence in the literature of a standing stone in Shaftesbury on the Bridport-Stonehenge ley line. The standing stone is a ‘standard’ neolithic means of fixing the earth energy, drawing it to the surface, connecting it to the solar energy. (The image is of the pinning down of the serpent’s head – it comes down to us most obviously as St George and the dragon – the negative spin coming from Christianity, of course.) With no specific evidence of a stone, I imagine there was a

maypole in the town square – not permanently there, but to be erected at the appropriate time, which would serve the same purpose – the disc at the top of the pole can just as easily be seen as a solar disc, rather than the female part as often stated. However it is interesting to note on the detailed map of 1799 that in the square is a town cross in an enclosure – a commercial echo of an earlier sacredness? Shaftesbury had five market crosses located near the market – successors of the pentacle of surrounding stones that would further amplify the energy. (The pentacle by tradition has the significance and perfection of the circle. The five points are spirit, earth, air, fire, water. It has the power of binding evil powers, hence it denotes good luck. It was the symbol on Gawain's shield.)² Thus would the new solar religion, of the Age of Taurus, the age of megaliths, seek to control and manipulate the earth spirit of Hermes, or Mercurius. (The Greeks erected 'hermae', carved standing stones, as journey markers.)

However the earth spirit has not one but two aspects. In Chinese feng shui they are called the Green Dragon and the White Tiger (perhaps my son's 'green grackle' and 'purple gelfy'?!). And dowsing on the St Michael line – the great ley line that crosses from St Michael's Mount to Lowestoft – has shown there are two currents of energy, of opposite polarities, spiralling around the line; now named the Michael and Mary currents. (The image of two intertwining energy currents is caught perfectly in Hermes' herald wand, the caduceus, in which the wand represents the *axis mundi*, the intertwined snakes (or ribbons) the masculine and feminine powers; and of course in the double helix of DNA.) The Green Dragon earth energy – exemplified by the Downs around us and the vast sky above. The White Tiger water energy – from the spring of Enmore Green. For the byzant is a water ceremony – even its shape seems to represent a gushing fountain. So that in May, the time for fertility rites, water was brought to the top of this dry hill. Possibly it was used to anoint or bathe the standing stone – as lingam stones are bathed in Hindu rituals. (In 1727 there is a record of water being brought from Enmore Green to wash St Peter's church – a relic?). Possibly symbolically to water the foliage associated with the maypole. The union of Green Man and May Queen. (The most recently married couple have at

² Interestingly, there is a five-sided house within feet of the town hall, perhaps an echo of the pentacle of power. And at the other end of the High Street, by the Post Office, five roads radiate, a five-pointed star.

times taken part in the ceremony.) Possibly the byzant is a miniature maypole: the hour of dancing – specified as part of the ritual in the Tudor document – was to activate the byzant that would then be carried to the town square. A version of the thyrsus (‘a staff or spear topped with a pine cone and sometimes wreathed in ivy or vine leaves’ OED), carried by Dionysus and his attendants? Of Hermes’ caduceus, which, in Botticelli’s *Primavera*, he thrusts up through the cloud – ‘of unknowing’ – something we need here on those ‘Shaftesbury days’ of enveloping cloud? Robert Coon sees it as a representation of Dr Dee’s Hieroglyphic Monad. It is topped by a pine cone, symbol of male fertility, ‘flame-shaped and phallic’. Water and fire. Connecting with the earth and the air of the hill top, the stone at the market square. (Feng shui means wind-water.)

Has this got a bit overheated? Time for the cold water of good sense? It, the byzant ceremony, was just a country way of turning a symbolic renewing of access rights into a ‘bit of a do’. Tout Hill is more usually seen as a form ‘Lookout Hill’. Where’s the standing stone, or evidence of it? The byzant itself has been ‘fancied up’ many times in its life (the most recent, in the nineteenth century, after the ceremony was stopped) – maybe its form reflects as much the tastes and the ideas of the time it was ‘improved’, as long tradition? Possibly. But there’s plenty of water around the edge of the hill, without sourcing in Gillingham tything – else how explain Laundry Lane, Tanyard Lane, Watery Lane (not to mention ‘Froggy Bottom’), all in St James? And why the Abbey fish ponds (and the rumoured tunnel through which water could be smuggled in during a siege) were on the St James’ side of town? And it’s accepted that water carriers used Stoney Path – surely not from Enmore Green. And why was so much effort expended on this ‘symbol’ if it meant so little? Decorated with plate worth thousands of pounds? Maybe it’s a matter of belief. Maybe, believing Shaftesbury is special, I want evidence through time of its specialness, I want the ceremony to be both symbol and activation of the annual renewal of the waters of life, of Shaftesbury’s spirit. But I am surprised that the symbols of Shaftesbury’s specialness (and, in the jargon of our time, its Unique Selling Points), the byzant, and Gold Hill, should be so little celebrated.

Let’s return to the byzant – because this is what is unique to Shaftesbury. Byzant (or bezant, the OED’s alternative spelling) has three mean-

ings: a gold coin from Byzantium, in circulation in C9th; the gold token that someone has been on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem; the King's offering when he receives the sacrament, or at a festival. Byzantium, Jerusalem, gold, religious ceremony, royalty. Such a richness of associations! The Jerusalem association possibly strengthened by the discovery of a fragment of early tenth-century cross found at East Stour, a manor owned by Shaftesbury Abbey, with carvings so similar to those in the Al-Aqca Mosque in Jerusalem "as to suggest the possibility of a direct model probably transmitted through portable artifacts."³ Suggesting a connection with Jerusalem *before* the Crusades. Gold is associated in symbolism with the sun, and with illumination – in alchemy, gold is the product of the interplay of sulphur and quicksilver (Mercury and Hermes), male and female principles. This taking place on Gold Hill. With a royal connection, maybe even a royal presence. Possibly Alfred's way of connecting the king's estate of Gillingham with his daughter's 'estate', the Abbey, the temporal with the spiritual. Maybe the Abbey, originally dedicated to the Virgin Mary – traditionally, as John Michell states⁴, associated with Hermes – absorbed a pre-Christian ceremony into its rituals. It is noteworthy that the byzant ceremony was on Holy Cross Day.⁵ Is it possible that water from the spring at Enmore Green found its way into the font at the Abbey? ('Font', of course means 'fountain'.)

There is another byzant reference – the ceremony (in the records) is also referred to as 'the ceremony of the besom'. Even here, there's a possible Middle Eastern connection – there is in Mecca the broom, used symbolically to clean the sacred Caaba. A symbol of cleansing – "that sweeps away all defilement of the soul".⁶ Cleansing a stone of great spiritual importance? As I noted earlier, water from Enmore Green was

³ *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art*, ed. Backhouse, Turner & Webster p42

⁴ *The Earth Spirit* p5

⁵ Chandler, in *A Higher Reality*, p23, says there was reputed to be a fragment of the True Cross at the Abbey. Remembered in the name of Holyrood Farm, by the Abbey fishponds?

⁶ There's a further odd 'coincidence' in that in Beckford's *Vathek*, written a few miles away at Fonthill, in the 1780s, this besom is blasphemously misused for profane cleaning. It reads now like a prophecy of the loss of the byzant's role. But also as a warning that if the ceremony *were* to be revived, it should not be as a kitchy tourist event.

used to clean St Peter's church – was this the relic of a ritual cleansing, echo of the anointing of a standing stone?

Every place needs its founding myth, its own mythology; in their protean slipperiness we can begin to find ways of tackling the contemporary problem which is, as Campbell says⁷ “nothing if not that of rendering the modern world spiritually significant – or rather (phrasing the same principle the other way round) nothing if not that of making it possible for men and women to come to full human maturity through the conditions of contemporary life”. “Il faut être absolument moderne” wrote Rimbaud – but, paradoxically, to be truly modern one has to keep open every possible connection with the past – the present contains within it all the past. My reason for writing this is to show that attention to the mythology of a place may point to actions that will enhance the well-being of that place.

Sacredness is about places and actions. It is the actions, the rituals, the ceremonies, that activate a site and keep it active; but the site must be auspicious or be made as auspicious as possible: for me, that means removing the town hall to release the earth spirit, and reactivating the spring at Enmore Green (remember how quickly the burghers of Shaftesbury resumed their payments after the spring was stopped up in early c19th?). Perhaps in some form the byzant ceremony should be resumed; Robert Coon suggests ways this might be done. Which brings us to *Spheres of Destiny: The Shaftesbury Prophecy*, where we move from what I have been writing about as a local matter, onto the world scale.

But first, let's return to when I was standing at the top of Gold Hill, facing the bars of the old lock-up. At some point I need to turn round. Now.

There's something visually dizzying, almost hallucinatory about the view from the top of Gold Hill – whether it's the variety and changing angles of the houses that step down the curved hill, as if placed there by a giant; or the huge overlapping buttresses of the abbey's retaining wall; maybe the way the cobbles flow down in waves. Or simply that there are

⁷ *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p388.

two views, two perspectives, conflicting with each other, that a photograph flattens but that the eye, trying to include both, is disquieted by.⁸

Look at the fore- and medium-ground – an urban scene, all stone and built environment, beguiling in the changing planes, the variety of surfaces, the way its curve closes off the view, contains it. Look at the distant view – the sweeps of downland and vale, the bare down and the cultivated vale, a purely rural scene.

Look at the whole – and suddenly the fore- and middle-ground, the cataract of cobbles, the cliff of buttressed wall, and, especially, the houses stepping down are flattened – they look like cardboard cut-outs, the flats of a stage set, against the backcloth of Melbury Down. But that is not one's *experience* if we take it *all* in – we experience disquiet, almost vertigo; but exhilaration, too, as we exist in these contrary states at once. And it's exactly this disquiet, this exhilaration that should be celebrated, led up to, framed, always available.

At a spiritual and esoteric level, I believe the dead weight of the town hall, dropped onto and weighing down the living heart of the town, and the stopping of the byzant ceremony, the annual process of reconnecting hilltop and vale, of bringing the 'water of life' to the town, crushed and dimmed the spirit of the town, like a drug that slows the heartbeat.

But also, at a spiritual and *aesthetic* level, I believe these actions cut the town off from connection to the wider world. The spiritual and aesthetic and esoteric ancient connection to the earth and its energy flows was replaced (by the priority given to the coach road, shops and bureaucracy) by its incorporation into the web of commerce. The uniqueness of Shaftesbury has been lost in its eagerness to be like everywhere else. What's weird (and perhaps results from the very damming of energy I'm talking about, the loss of insight) is that the very people who see

⁸ A photograph, and the dozens of paintings and drawings I've seen of Gold Hill - I'm still waiting for someone to make an image that doesn't look like it's copied from a photograph, that uses any of the pictorial techniques invented in the last more than 100 years (whether post-impressionism, cubism, expressionism, surrealism, abstraction, to pull five obvious possibilities from the history of art) to give a sense of what Gold Hill actually *looks* like. Indeed it's one of my ambitions to have an exhibition devoted to pictures of Gold Hill, that on one side would illustrate the way it has been turned into an *image*, rather than what it looks like, on the other would encourage artists to look at, think about, experience Gold Hill in its *actuality* - and represent it in visual form; and hopefully come up with a *new* iconic image of it.

Shaftesbury in purely commercial terms don't see that they have an un-exploited treasure, a usp (unique selling point), that would make them far more money than their eager turning of the town into the clone of a thousand other small towns. As the drawing by Arthur of the sword from the stone released a trapped energy, enabled the Arthurian story to happen, so removing the town hall could release Shaftesbury to live out its own story. The town lacks vision – but of course the reason it lacks vision is the thing that stops it having the vision to realise why, even *that*, it lacks vision. I don't know whether this is paradox or irony. Of course it's neither – it's tragedy.

Appendix 1

Spheres of Destiny: The Shaftesbury Prophecy – A Planetary Vision for the 21st Century, by Robert Coon, was written in 1989, published 20th August 1993. Read it at http://members.lycos.co.uk/glastonbury/contents_shaftes.html (out of print). What to make of it? There are hundreds of books that treat Glastonbury as a Centre of New Age Revelation (Coon has written several of them); we should look at the only book that treats Shaftesbury as such a Centre. It's not an easy read - it assumes a familiarity with and acceptance of such ideas as the dawning of a New Aeon, the existence of the Holy Grail, the coming of the New Jerusalem, the reality of earth chakras and morpnic resonance.... And it's written in a Blakean prophetic style that Uses Lots of Initial Capital Letters. But, the ideas, and especially the research that followed his initial Revelation, are intriguing. This is how he begins:

“Shaftesbury, in Dorset, England, is to emerge and establish itself as a major New Age Centre of Light and Freedom for this Earth.” Phew. Its emergence follows the opening of the Omega Point at Glastonbury, through which is expressed the “Full Truth of the Holy Grail”. This Point may expand into an Omega Sphere through the agency of an evocation of Gaia in the form of an Eagle at Glastonbury; but only if “the initial Flight of the Eagle is activated by a planetary aspect of Divine Will rooted within the earth in the area surrounding the town of Shaftesbury, Dorset”. Once this has happened, the Sphere can progressively expand and, by activating sacred sites across the earth, through their

agency, bring about the New Aeon. So far, so New Age. And yet, isn't there something intriguing about a book that puts Shaftesbury at the centre of such an idea? Let's take a closer look.

Glastonbury is traditionally associated with the Grail or Cup, the source of life. Shaftesbury - Scepterberg - is the town of the spear, sceptre or wand, the instrument of fructifying. This is represented, of course, in the byzant. 'If the Abbot of Glaston marries the Abbess of Shaston, their Children shall have more abundant wealth than the King of England' is a medieval saying. Interpret this spiritually, as a metaphor for spiritual wealth, and the union of Glastonbury, the monks as custodians of the yin archetype of the cup, with Shaftesbury, where the nuns were keepers of the yang spear or wand archetype, produces an alchemical union, a new synthesis. Add in Shaftesbury being the first nunnery, its first Abbess the king's daughter, one of the 12th century abbesses being (it's thought) Marie de France, the foremost woman writer of her day, Geoffrey of Monmouth's⁹ reference to the Sayings of the Eagle spoken as the walls of Caer Palladwr (castle of the spear) "which is now called Shaftesbury", while the walls were being built, and the healing miracles at the tomb of Edward (whose death had about it elements of a ritual slaying), and suddenly the notion of Shaftesbury as place of significance gains force. If it had been kept alive during the development of Shaftesbury, as similar traditions were by John Wood in the transformation of Bath in the 18th century¹⁰, Shaftesbury would be a healthier place now. One doesn't have to accept Coon's ideas wholesale (although his book is packed with ideas and information that are well worth pondering) to see how viewing Shaftesbury's history differently can change one's relationship to it now.

Appendix 2

Checking alignments on a map, I was very excited to discover that Glastonbury, Shaftesbury, Delphi, the Great Pyramid, and Mecca were on a straight line: Mecca, home of the sacred besom of the Caaba, "which sweeps away all defilement from the soul"; the Great Pyramid, where

⁹ *The History of the Kings of Britain*, p80 in Penguin edition.

¹⁰ *Obsession: John Wood and the Creation of Georgian Bath*. Wood returned to Bladud as the founding figure of Bath - and Bladud is on the same page in Geoffrey's *History* as Paladur and 'The sayings of the Eagle'.

the Word (in Coon's scheme) is made manifest; Delphi, navel of the world, home of a prophetic oracle; Glastonbury-Shaftesbury, the heart-will chakra of Coon's Gaia consciousness; our very own ley line...! Except I hadn't taken into account the map projection, so it wasn't. (There is in fact an Apollo-Athena line linking St Michael's Mount with Mont St Michel, Assisi, Delphi, Athens and Mt Carmel.) But it got me thinking about Delphi – a sacred site established when Zeus released two eagles which circled the earth and met above Delphi. (Coon envisions an eagle flying from Glastonbury Tor, “to Shaftesbury, Dorset - summoned with a wand by the Master of the Cauldron”, across the eagle figure in the Glastonbury Zodiac to form an eagle landscape figure over Shaftesbury.) Turning to the Homeric Hymn to Pythian Apollo, (and Calasso's reading of it¹¹) we read that Apollo took over the shrine at Delphi by chasing away Telphusa, an enchanting nymph, and killing Python, a guardian dragon, and controlling fluid knowledge by imposing his poetic metre. The power of the place had been split in two, defeated, but would one day be reunited as Melusina. Easy to see an analogy with the suppressing of the Green Dragon and White Tiger energy sources by rationalist/commercial forces of 1820s' Shaftesbury. I look forward to the day of Melusina.

All the time, in this work, I'm trying to suggest ideas, images, metaphors that stimulate our *imaginings*, what Calasso calls “mental waters”, quivering, sparkling, vibrating *mental matter* of which image, the *eidolon*, is made. The Athenian myth of Athena as the founding deity of Athens, Rome's foundation myth *The Aeniad*, were stories, products of the imagination that resonated with the people of Athens and Rome.

Appendix 3

Joseph Campbell writes¹² “To bring the images back to life, one has to seek, not interesting applications to modern affairs, but illuminating hints from the inspired past. When these are found, vast areas of half-dead iconography disclose again their permanently human meaning”. Rather than cute revivals (and it may well be that the physical byzant has no part to play, has lost any potency it may have had – leaving aside

¹¹ *Literature and the Gods*, Robert Calasso, Chapter 2.

¹² *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p249.

the question of how important the *actual* object is) we should be looking at the “illuminating hints from the inspired past”.

Hence my proposal for an open area and a fountain, its form derived from the byzant, which is just one idea. The linking of earth and water: rootedness to the earth is expressed by the omphalos, the stone; earth links to heaven with standing stone (or market cross); water links to underworld from spring; standing stone both connects – axis mundi – and keeps heaven and earth apart, makes life possible; water in a fountain expresses both chaos from which all originates, and fertilising and creative power.

Appendix 4

- 1) *Spheres of Destiny: The Shaftesbury Prophecy* by Robert Coon is out of print but online at http://members.lycos.co.uk/glastonbury/contents_shaftes.html