

A Forgotten Ground Regained Reprint

Michael Smith

The modern landscape of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

The Middle English alliterative masterpiece, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (SGGK), is well known for its complexity, richness in depth and tightly-observed social and natural realism. Its poet, generally identified as the author of *Pearl*, *Cleanness* and *Patience*, is a writer with deep religious values and a profound capability in expressing them.¹ In the light of these works, we can see that SGGK cannot be seen purely as a romance written for entertainment alone; it instead holds a mirror to individual behaviour in the real world and asks its readers to reflect upon its messages. In placing his narrative in an identifiable northern locale, the *Gawain*-poet invites us to reflect upon the behaviour of his poem's characters and compare their ideals, desires and needs to those of our own – our own failings and foibles. Across the coast of North Wales, over to the Wirral, through the Cheshire Plain and on to the Staffordshire Roaches – it is here where Arthurianism is stripped bare and we all must face our demons.

Magical landscapes

Before we examine the real world of SGGK it is worth reflecting on the world it uses as its setting, as its lure to the unsuspecting aficionado of traditional romance. At the very beginning of the poem we are placed in a magical Britain, a land of 'bliss and blunder' (l. 18) established by 'Felix' Brutus (l. 13) seemingly to create a land of immortals who are 'bold-bred' and 'lovers of battle' (l. 21). It is in this framework that we are expected to encounter and visualise King Arthur; the poet draws us into the 'matter of Britain' and shows us that what takes place here is deep-rooted and rich. As the poet completes this picture of Britain in his second verse, his camera slowly zooms in and soon we are at Camelot at Christmas time (l.37).

¹ It is acknowledged that the text containing all four MSS is written by the same scribe. It is assumed authorship is the same although, for clarity, see the discussion of the authorship of these poems in Andrew & Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, pp. 15-17

² Such romances include *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* amongst others.

Unlike other northern alliterative romances which place Arthur at Carlisle and the north country², or even at Caerleon³, SGGK places its hero in a location so powerful in the imagination that we need know no more about it. In placing the king at Camelot, the poet is telling us immediately that this is a romance in the Arthurian tradition, it will involve well-known characters and that it is set, above all, in Britain. In using Camelot, and placing his action 'upon' Christmas time, the poet is asking his audience to position what follows somewhere other than today; it is here that he can explore his messages and play them out. He is asking us to balance his story of magic and darkness against the eternal message of hope which is Christmas. During fifteen days of festivities Arthur, in his idle, earthbound ennui, demands entertainment; he seemingly prefers holiday pleasures to religious observance. So it is that the magical Green Knight emerges from somewhere unknown to lay down his gruesome challenge. Only in Camelot might such things happen but then, once the Knight has left and the court returns to partying, the poet in his skill and craft lifts us right from the magic and straight into the mind. In drawing us into how Gawain is now thinking, the poet lifts us at once from the magical world to the real world. Deeds have consequences, nothing is a game; this is for real.

Real worlds

The seasons pass in a wonderful two stanzas of alliterative verse which culminate in that melancholic and spine-chilling line with its ensuing bob and wheel:

*And thus the year yearns in yesterdays many,
And winter wends again, as the world grows
In age,
Till Michaelmas moon*

³ *The Alliterative Morte Arthure* (the AMA) (l. 61) references Caerleon and its 'curious walls' – possibly the Roman amphitheatre there which may even have evoked a sense of the Round Table (see also Smith, MTA: *King Arthur's Death – The Alliterative Morte Arthure*, p. 168). Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chretien de Troyes also reference Caerleon; the AMA may prefer us to identify Arthur's court with Carlisle over Caerleon, perhaps to appeal to a more local audience.

*Was come with winter wage.
Then thinks Gawain full soon
Of his most anxious voyage*

[ll. 529-35]⁴

Now, in this real world of worry as the year quickly passes, Gawain is ritually prepared for his journey ahead by being armed for battle as he stands on a richly-woven tapestry laid out on the floor (l. 568). Taken from this fantasy world of far imagination, we are now with Gawain as he ventures forth into the Land of Logres (loosely, Britain) (l. 691) which, as if by magic, suddenly fragments from the page to become a real, identifiable place: North Wales and the Isle of Anglesey (Ynys Môn) (ll. 697-98).

When the poet writes of “all the isles of Anglesey on the left he beholds” (l. 698), he reflects the journey of an individual who is following the coast road from Caernarfon along the Menai Straits and onwards to Conwy; this is an area known to the poet. Furthermore, Gawain’s precise reference to “all” the islands suggests he has already moved away from the main isle and Holy Island and is now also seeing Puffin Island from the upper road in or around Penmaenmawr; he is closer to Conwy on his journey where Puffin Island is fully visible as a distinct island. It is curious that the poet does not name either Conwy or any other settlements along this road until Gawain reaches Holywell (the “Holy Head” [l. 700]) and then crosses the estuary of the Dee onto the Wirral. The places named by the poet are therefore suggestive of an author who knew these lands well, possibly through travel on missions to Ireland or to the royal astles of Conwy (Conway), Caernarfon (Caernarvon) or Biwmares (Beaumaris), but who wished to describe the land generally without getting too enmeshed within a complete description. Notwithstanding, his specific inclusion of both Holywell and Wirral appear to carry a weight beyond their mere

inclusion as geographical. The geography reminds us of the journey taken by Richard II in 1399 when he stopped at Conwy before travelling onto



Figure 1: View towards Anglesey and Puffin Island from the coast of North Wales

Fflint (Flint) where he met Henry Bolingbroke, the man who finally usurped the crown to become Henry IV. If it is the case that SGGK was written around the same time as these momentous events – possibly slightly later – such a journey might have evoked a sense of prescient danger to a 14th-century audience. Alternatively, the poet’s reference to the Holy Head might, for the devout, also have increased the sense of foreboding and horror; the shrine of St Winefride at Holywell is that of a Welsh princess who was beheaded by a suitor identifiers. when she refused his advances.

⁴ All translations from the poem in this article are taken from Smith, MTA: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight – A New Telling of the Fourteenth Century Alliterative Masterpiece*, Unbound, 2018.

The shrine, and its richly decorated well-head which still exists today, was well-known across Britain in the fourteenth-century; an educated audience may also have seen this reference as a reminder of Gawain's fate. Winefride was ultimately to have her head restored by her brother, St Bueno; the audience is being reminded that faith, not magic, is the route to salvation for those condemned to die. This message comes back to haunt Gawain when he is shamed by the Green Knight towards the end of the poem; in having her own head restored, Winefride is also the perfect holy foil to the horror of the Green Knight himself.

At Holywell, Gawain then crosses onto the Wirral, a fact all the more notable because in doing so he avoids both Fflint (where Richard met his denouement) and Chester (Richard's stronghold). Avoiding what seem like natural places of haven, Gawain's dramatic deviation at this point appears singular, although his decision to do so further enhances the perception of him as an outsider, a castaway or even an outlaw. Now, being compelled to cross the hazardous waters of the sandy Dee estuary he departs the shore,

[...] till he found land again,
In the wilderness of Wirral; few there did live
That loved with good heart either God or great men!
[ll. 700-702]

The poet has a dim view of this low-lying peninsula which lies between the Dee and the Mersey like a tongue at the edge of Cheshire, separating the expanse of southern Lancashire from the borders of North Wales. Even today, unless you are taking the ferry across the Mersey, or going via the Mersey Tunnel from Liverpool to Birkenhead, a detour is needed to venture onto the Wirral. At the time of the *Gawain*-poet, only an indistinct ford between Holywell and the Wirral⁵, or humble ferry boats via dangerous

⁵ See Ralph Elliott: "Landscape and Geography" in Brewer, D (ed.): *A Companion to the Gawain-poet*, p. 115. I am unconvinced by the alternative ford across the Dee at Aldford as this lies below Chester and takes Gawain away from the Wirral on his journey.

⁶ See Elliott, Op.cit. p. 115 and also Michael J. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careerism – Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,

waters, would have permitted Gawain access to an area which, at the very end of the fourteenth century, was subject to 'lawlessness and local rebellions'.⁶ While it is possible that in referring to the 'wilderness of Wir-



Figure 2: The 'Holy Head' – the spring as it emerges at St Winefride's Well, Holywell, Flintshire

pp. 218-9. It is notable from Bennett's work that Wirral was then, as now, a place of great wealth; the comments made by the poet may reflect a view on the independent and forceful actions of Sir John Stanley of Lathom between 1385 and 1414.

ral' the poet may have simply been referring to the deforestation of the landscape which was complete by the final quarter of the fourteenth century, his language nonetheless implies some sort of reflection on political events.⁷ Today, the Wirral is a much more stable place and, in places, home to great wealth. Perhaps the best way to see it at its best is from the A55 as it climbs the Clwydian Hills in North Wales; on a clear day, the peninsula stretches out before you while beyond you see the city of Liverpool (a small town in the poet's time), the expanse of the Mersey valley and, in the distance to the north and east, the hills which cradle Lancashire and northern Cheshire. Somewhere in that view, long ago, the *Gawain*-poet first put pen to parchment.

Dangerous reality

On leaving the Wirral, Gawain could choose to head north, crossing the Mersey at Warrington (the lowest crossing point of the Mersey until comparatively recent times) or venture eastwards inland; either way, he would ultimately reach the hills and fells the poet subsequently describes. Ralph Elliott suggests, and scholarship largely agrees, that Gawain turns towards the east as he heads in the direction of Leek in Staffordshire, possibly following the Earl's Way.⁸ Today, Leek is seen as a centre for all things Gawain but of particular interest is less the town and more the hills in which it shelters: the Staffordshire Roaches or, thinking of the "rocheres" (l. 1698) (OF, "roches") of the *Gawain*-poet, the unusual weathered sandstone rocks which so define them. As we approach the Roaches from the Cheshire plain today we see them as a ridge in the distance, rising from their flat surroundings as they form an outer edge to the Derbyshire Peaks which lie beyond. Both areas are of relevance to the modern scholar. Once here, we are drawn into a world of literary inspiration and it is not difficult to connect what we see with what the poet describes. Perhaps of most relevance is the dramatic view if we look back from the top and out towards the Cheshire Plain where, in the far distance, Beeston castle sits majestically

on its isolated ancient rock rising some 350 feet above the fields and meres. It is not difficult to imagine this as the poet's "Hautdesert" (high wilderness), surrounded as it is by two separate ditches, the second of which at the summit provides the ultimate line of defence against any attacker. However, as I shall discuss later, Beeston does not, and cannot, fit into the poet's description of a castle so perfect that it seemed 'pared out of paper' (l. 802).

The poet enters this rocky landscape almost immediately upon leaving the Wirral; as he tells us,

*Many cliffs he climbs over in strange countryside;
And far-flung from his friends as a foreigner he rides*

[ll. 713-4]

In so saying we know already that he is alone and in dangerous territory. Amongst these crags, he faces dangers of many kinds:

*In those mountains our man finds so many marvels
That to tell of one tenth of them would be just tedious!
Sometimes he wars with dragons and wolves,
Sometimes with wodwose which dwelled in those crags,
Both with bulls and bears and boars all the while,
And with ogres which harried him in the high fells...*

[ll. 718-23]

The poet makes clear that this landscape is distinctive, isolated and threatening; he reinforces this by having Gawain cry out to Mary, praying for a refuge so that he can celebrate Christmas prior to his inevitable meeting with his nemesis. What is also clear is that Gawain is now within a different, upland landscape far from the safety of castles such as Beeston. Here, among the Roaches, he not only leaves behind the safety of the Cheshire Plain but he also ventures further within the rocky landscape; he

⁷ For an insight on the deforestation of the Wirral, see Francis Ingledew, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Order of the Garter*, pp. 8-9

⁸ Elliott, "Landscape and Geography", Op. cit. p. 116.

appears to be travelling into the Peak District, the isolated lower ranges of the Pennines which so split the north of England sharply between West and East.

But if Gawain ventures into the empty wastes of the Peaks, there are few places where Hautdesert might be; the area has very few significant castles of any description and only lonely Peveril at Castleton might be a consideration albeit, with its simple keep and primitive walled courtyard, a rank outsider for the castle described by the poet:

*Now hardly had that knight crossed himself but thrice,
That he saw in that wood a home in a moat,
Above a plain, on a knoll, locked under boughs
Of many brawny boles about by the ditches;
The comeliest castle that knight had ever seen,
Perched among pastures, a park all about,
Within a spiked palisade, pinned full thick,
That tied in many trees for more than two miles...*
[ll. 763-70]



Figure 3: The curious weathered sandstone outcrops which so define the Staffordshire Roaches

This is a castle in a landscape; a statement piece. Like Beeston, it rises above a plain, on a knoll, but Beeston is situated less on a knoll and more on a dramatic eminence rising some 350 feet above the Cheshire Plain and visible for many miles. Hautdesert does not, I consider, rise on such an eminence but instead is simply on high ground, to be seen and admired by visitors and surrounded by a deer park as befits its status. In this manner we are reminded of the simple motte and bailey at Dunham Massey in Cheshire or even of Benington in Hertfordshire where both small castles abut nearby deer parks. We are introduced therefore to a castle as “home” (l. 764) and a place of status but not necessarily to a building of vast proportions. Notwithstanding, the poet wants us to imagine a place of splendour:

The knight bided on his horse and beheld from the bank

*Of the deep double ditch that defended that place,
That its walls rose from water wonderfully deep,
And thus a huge height it seemed heaped upon hight
Of hand-hewn stones right up to the corbels,
In a band under the battlements, in the best manner...*

[ll.785-90]

The castle is surrounded by a wet moat and one so deep that it makes the castle, reflected in its waters, seem even higher. Whether the poet means the castle has twin ditches (as at Helmsley in the North Riding or at Berkhamstead in Hertfordshire) or whether, as suggested by Michael Thompson,⁹ he means that the ditch is simply doubly deep, the presence of such defences imply majesty and power. A castle built ‘in the best manner’ in fourteenth century England is more than just a simple dwelling but one of architectural ornamentation and magnificence in the manner of those depicted in the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*. The poet reinforces this by telling us of its ‘fair finials’ (l. 796), ‘carved conical caps’ to the towers (l. 797), its ‘chimneys’ (l. 798) and its ‘painted pinnacles’ (l. 800); it is so exquisite that the castle seemed to be ‘pared out of paper’ (l. 802).



Figure 4: *The Cheshire Plain viewed from the Roaches. Beeston Castle is highlighted in the distance.*

I don't consider this place to be geographically situated by the poet but instead to be a castle combining those features with which he must have been acquainted through experience. We might imagine statement castles such as Bodiam (Sussex) or Nunney (Somerset) which, set in calm waters, drew inspiration from France. Alternatively, we could imagine the magnificent accommodation of Haddon Hall in Derbyshire which, though lacking a moat, is, notwithstanding, a magnificent example of medieval architecture set on a valley side to appear magical in the northern landscape. It is not hard to imagine Bertilak setting forth from such a place and immediately entering the hostile landscape of wintry Derbyshire to hunt for the deer, boar and fox which he will bring to Sir Gawain.

⁹ See Michael Thompson, “Castles”, in Brewer, *A Companion to the Gawain-poet*, p. 125

The Green Chapel

Ensnconced in the castle, the reader is immediately drawn to contrast the warmth inside the building with the cold wintry world outside. The



Figure 5: Haddon Hall, Derbyshire - the type of castle imagined by the poet in his description of Hautdesert

genius of the poet is to create two parallel hunting scenarios: the lady's chase in pursuit of the 'luf-talking' Gawain and Bertilak in pursuit of his sport. Whether up in the Roaches or in the Derbyshire dales and peaks, we can imagine on any winter's day the cold hostility of the landscape the poet describes; it is in doing so that he prepares us so wonderfully for Gawain's denouement up in the terrifying wastes where the Green Chapel lies waiting. As he writes,

*Then he goads Gringolet and gathers the road,
Shoves on by a scarp with scrub at his side,*

¹⁰ As glossed in Andrew and Waldon: *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*

*Rides by that rugged bank, right to the dale.
Then he looks round about, he thought it most wild,
And sees no sign of residence nowhere beside,
But high banks all bleak upon both sides,
And rough-knuckled knolls of rocks and stone;
Those scouts scratched the sky, it seemed to him.
So with that he hove to and restrained his horse,
And kept changing where he looked to chance on that chapel.
He sees nonesuch on no side, which he thought so strange,
Seeing little on that land save a knoll as it were,
A bald bump by a bank, beside the brim river,
Which flushed about there by the force of its flow;
That bourn blubbered such there that it seemed to boil...*

[ll. 2160-74]

It is clear from the description that Gawain has entered a valley in which runs a raging stream; on one side on a bank is a 'bald bump' ('balze berz' – a smooth or rounded barrow or mound).¹⁰ Debate varies as to whether the berz is in fact a hill rather than a barrow;¹¹ a more typical word in Middle English for such a structure is "lawe" (a barrow or 'low'); this means that a fundamental identification of the Green Chapel, a place clearly known to the poet,¹² cannot be conclusive. Notwithstanding, two strong candidates emerge: Lud's Church, near Flash, in Staffordshire and the cave at Wetton Mill in the Manifold valley in Derbyshire.

Lud's Church is frequently seen as the prime candidate for the Green Chapel because, as the poet describes the place,

*It had a hole at one end and on either side,
And was overgrown with grass that grew everywhere,
And was all hollow within, naught but an old cave,
Or the crevice of an old crag [...]*

[ll. 2180-83]

¹¹ See Elliott, "Landscape and Geography", *Op. cit.* p. 113

¹² *Ibid.* p. 113

Certainly, any visitor to Lud's Church today will immediately be drawn to the similarities it has to the poet's description. Approached from below, the 'church' is indeed a crevice in the craggy sandstone; as you venture further into it, its mossy sides rise above you some thirty feet, water drips from the sides and grass and vegetation loom overhead; it can be entered from either end (although the top is less well trodden). However, the 'church' itself is not distinct from the rest of the bank and the narrow crevice lies hidden in the trees; it would not be noticeable to the casual observer in the way the poet describes. Although there is an argument linking this geological fissure to a fourteenth century Lollard church, and that the place has a haunting atmosphere akin to entering a hellish underworld, in other ways it seems unsuitable. Unlike Lud's Church which is – and probably always was – open to the sky, the Green Chapel has a roof ("he romez vp to þe roffe of þo ro3 wonez" – 'he winds his way up to the roof of that rough abode' [l. 2198]). The language suggests that the location may be elsewhere.

A key feature of the Green Chapel is that it is situated by a boiling stream and that the Green Knight himself descends rapidly to it from a position high above and on the other side of the river. As the poet writes,

*Then he heard from that high hill, in a hard rock
Beyond the brook, in the boulders, a wondrous bad noise*
[ll. 2199-200]

Then, threatening Sir Gawain from above, the Green Knight 'clanders by a crag and crops up from a hole' (l. 2221). The description of the crags and the hole is suggestive of a different kind of landscape than the sandstone of the Roaches; it hints at a limestone or karst landscape where potholes and long passages are naturally cut by water. At Wetton Mill in the Manifold valley can be found a cave by a river which at one time was roofed and which, though despite today having one main entrance, shows signs of other passages into it which have long been filled with debris. The cave is also distinctive in that it is cut into what from the distance looks like a mound; situated right by the river, the cave not only appears in the right location but is also visible from within the valley. An inspection of the cave, and situated right by the river, the cave not only appears in the right location

but is also visible from within the valley. An inspection of the cave, and others locally (such as the magnificent Thor's Cave further down the valley) immediately reveals the power of water in shaping them; the Green Knight himself could have passed through such tunnels to 'crop up' from his hole.

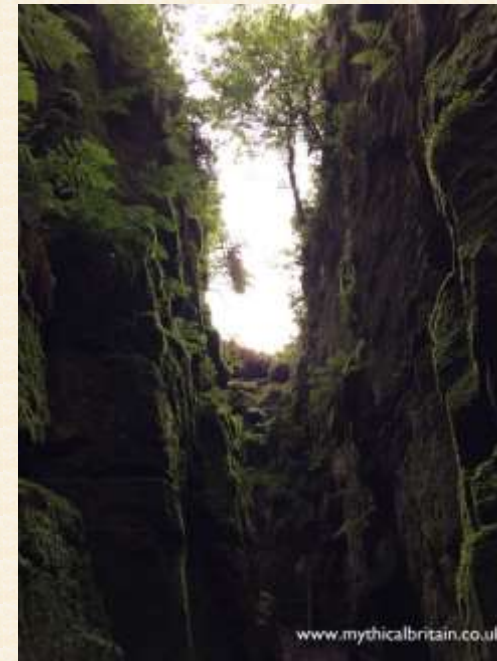


Figure 6: *The dark and atmospheric interior of Lud's church, Staffordshire*

In describing the Chapel, the poet clearly had a place in mind but it is notable that he describes the Chapel as a 'naught but an old cave or [my italics] the crevice of an old crag'. If the Peaks and the Roaches were indeed familiar to the poet (and his knowledge of hunting in these wintry wastes certainly suggests he knew the area well), then it is possible that he is conflating both places to create his 'chapel of meschaunce' (Chapel of Doom) [l. 2195] fit for the Devil's matins (l. 2188). We might also consider

that in so doing he is drawing on knowledge of other sites in the area which may also have inspired his imagination. He may indeed have called to mind the lonely, windswept barrow, Gib Hill, and its associated nearby henge of Arbor Low with its twin entrances and long-levelled flat stones. Here, on a snowy winter's day, with just the winds and grey skies of Derbyshire for company, it is not impossible even today to feel a sense of dread and foreboding in a place where, if the mind ran riot, it might easily be possible to hear the Devil at his prayers.

Conclusion

There seems little doubt that the *Gawain*-poet had an intimate knowledge of his local environment both in terms of geography and how people interacted with it. His description of Gawain's journey across North Wales suggests a writer who knew the main route along the coast as a consequence of his work, and who may have operated within a powerful Lancashire or Cheshire household associated either with Richard II, John of Gaunt or Henry Bolingbroke. His casual remarks concerning the Wirral also give us a tantalising glimpse of an area of Cheshire which seems to have been subjective to forces with which he disagreed. The text also seems to

show a close knowledge of the Roaches, the southern Peak District and a sense of its looming status, forever in the background on the Cheshire Plain. We note too the poet's intimate understanding not just of castles and landscapes but of the aesthetics of the castle and its architectural position as a projector of power and taste. By contrast, his description of the Green Chapel is diametrically opposite to this aesthetic but, in creating such a closely-observed Chapel of Doom, he reveals an understanding of elements within the landscape which in truth could only be achieved if he had ready experience of seeing them, most likely on a hunt with members of his lord's household. Perhaps the poet's greatest legacy for those seeking to follow in his literary footsteps is that he places a magical story in a place that was real; the reality of this world enables us to find it again in modern-day Cheshire, Staffordshire and Derbyshire. Because of this vitality, the *Gawain*-poet is with us still, inviting us anew to venture into the snowy wastes and meet once that man 'wrxled in grene [to] dele here his devocioun on þe Devezel wyse' ('wrapped in green to deal here with his devotion to the Devil' [ll. 2191-2]). In placing his magical narrative in a world so real and tangible, the poet reminds us that what might appear as myth might actually be true.



Figure 7: The mysterious cave at Wetton Mill in the Manifold valley, Derbyshire



Figure 8: The probable route of Gawain's journey

About the Author

Michael Smith is a British translator and linocut illustrator of Middle English alliterative romances. Born in Warrington, Cheshire, he holds an Honours degree in History and an MA in Medieval Literatures and Languages from the University of York. He has now returned to the city to study for his PhD, where he is conducting research into the translation, performance and effective modern representation of late medieval Middle English stanzaic poetry. A former student of the Curwen Print Study Centre near Cambridge, Michael is also an active printmaker whose graces many private collections around the world. To date, he has published three illustrated translations of medieval romances: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2018); *King Arthur's Death – the Alliterative Morte Arthure* (2021); and *The Romance of William and the Werewolf (William of Palerne)* (2024). To find out more about Michael and his work, please visit www.mythicalbritain.co.uk.

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