

## The Hidden Island

Nobody can now tell you with any precision when it was that the island of Arcania came into being. Or how, for that matter. You see, wizards are good at all sorts of things, but they write very little down, so they do not make reliable historians.

Of course, any wizard will say, blithely, 'It was back in *The Dark Times*'. And they would say it just like that, too: *in italics*. Years ago, they probably would have said it in Gothic script. But try to pin them down more than that and.....well, I wish you luck.

So when were *The Dark Times*? As far as I can make out from bits and pieces of information, it was a period when England was subject to frequent invasions from mainland Europe. And with the European invaders came the European wizards. And many of the European wizards, especially those from Hexenheim, were mighty warrior wizards, well-versed in the arts of combat, with the power to turn battles. The English wizards, by contrast, were skilled at painting, music and the like. Oh, they could perform defensive magic, which came in handy, but they were outnumbered and outgunned by the Europeans. Some rebelled and held out for a while, including a substantial group of witches, but eventually they were rounded up and their conquerors debated what to do with them.

Luckily, the English wizards had friends in high places. Their gifts in the field of music and the arts appealed to the new rulers, tired as they were of fighting and constant travel. They desired peace and, with it, the odd bit of culture. Not too much, but just enough to demonstrate to their subjects and each other that they could be civilised when they wanted to be. So, what to do with these wizards?

"Islands, my lord." Thus spake Fulbert, the most powerful of all the Hexenheim wizards.

“Eh?” said the King. “Er, I mean, Pardon?” He had remembered he was supposed to be civilised now.

“What is this country full of? Islands. What would not be noticed if there were a few more of them? Islands. How can we keep these prancing pipsqueaks quarantined from the rest of the population? Stick them on islands. And wizards, as you may have observed, are not keen on water. Get the drift, your kingship?”

“Ah, I see,” said the King, slowly. He had not understood at all, of course, but he was gradually persuaded and, in due course, Fulbert’s plan was put into practice.

Under Fulbert’s direction, a team of wizards drawn from the ranks of both the Europeans and the English, with a few Irish, Scots and Welsh brought in on a sub-contract basis, went pottering around the coasts of the British Isles, looking for suitable locations. Their brief: to find, or alternatively to drag up from the depths, sufficient islands in well-scattered spots to house the English wizards in manageable groups; they needed to be accessible for the King, his household and his senior officials; they must be flexible enough to allow for expanding populations; and they had to be susceptible of disguise from mere mortals. The whole project, allowing for negotiating terms, construction and a lot of advanced spell-work, took a couple of decades to complete but, in the fullness of time, a number of islands were available for occupation.

The island which interests us for the purposes of this chronicle is the Island of Arcania which sits off the south coast of England. I am not empowered or authorised to tell you exactly where it is but I can give you a clue. Have you ever been to Studland Bay or Durlston Head and thought you could just make out the Isle of Wight in the distance? Or have you ever been to the Downs above the Needles and thought you could just make out the

Isle of Purbeck? Well, you might not have been seeing what you thought you were seeing. I'll say no more for now, if you will excuse me. I think perhaps I have said too much already.

Suffice it to say that if you are in that part of the world and you overhear people in unconventional clothes muttering about 'The Island' then they are probably talking about 'The Hidden Island' or the Island of Arcania. Or the Isle of Wight. Or the Isle of Purbeck. Or Brownsea or Hayling or any number of other islands. And why were you eavesdropping anyway?

Only a few hundred wizards, witches and assorted associates settled on Arcania to begin with. Now there are thousands. Such is the way of the world and, after all, wizards are not immune from the sinful lusts of the flesh. Fulbert was no fool. He foresaw this. Each of the wizard islands was endowed with a powerful spell to allow it to expand within its own boundaries. Measured empirically, Arcania is only six miles by three, so it would be a bit crowded by now were it not for magical expansion which takes it up to four times that size for those who abide there. (There is a counter-theory that everything and everybody on the island is reduced by three-quarters of their original size. When this thesis is put to one of Arcania's elders, their answer tends to be 'So what?' – and you can see their point.)

Speaking of the elders, let us drop in on a conversation between a couple of them.

“So Horace, this is a bit of a how-d'ye-do, eh?”

“You're right there, Cuthbert, and no mistake.”

“How much longer before someone needs to do something, do you think, Horace?”

“Not long now, Cuthbert, and no mistake.”

“No. Do you think we should speak to Wilf about it?”

“Hmm, you might be right, Cuthbert. How about another pint in the meantime?”

“Good idea, Horace. After you.”

So, a hint of some concern amongst the elders of Arcania, but perhaps not too pressing. More of that anon. First, let us switch our attention to a middle-aged couple strolling along the cliff path at Durlston Head, enjoying a rare sunny day on their annual Dorset holiday.

“Spied any dolphins yet, Vera?”

“Nope. Not a sausage, Malcolm.”

“Fine, well, that’s good news. But what about the dolphins?”

“Tut,” said Vera.

“What was that, darling?”

“I said ‘Tut’,” Vera repeated, “And I meant it. Here, pass me those binoculars.”

“Do you know,” Vera continued, after peering fixedly into the distance, “I’ll swear the Isle of Wight’s getting closer every year.”

“Yes, well, probably is – but isn’t that a dolphin splashing about over there?”

“Where?”

“There.”

“There?”

“No, there.”

“Oh, there?”

“Yes...no. No, it's gone now. I'm sure it was there a moment ago.”

And, disappointed as they were every year, Malcolm and Vera walked on.

Why did we bother to drop in on them, you ask? A fair question, which I shall endeavour to answer. But not yet. I must again crave your indulgence. Let us just leave it that, had Horace and Cuthbert heard the conversation I have just transcribed, they would have had even more cause for concern.

Fancy a quick trip around the island? OK, I just have time for a fleeting visit. Hold on to your lifebelts, seat-belts, or anything else that comes to hand; it makes no odds to me.

So, as you can see (or you could if I had remembered the map), Arcania is roughly diamond-shaped. It is liberally supplied with rivers, together with the odd lake, and downland and woods are plentiful. Sounds a bit like the Isle of Wight, you say? How very perceptive of you. You are not in error, but there is a simple reason for the similarity. You see, the wizards who created Arcania were not an especially imaginative bunch and many of them actually originated from the Isle of Wight which has always produced a high quotient of wizards and witches, being a naturally magical place. You doubt that assertion? Please just check the Tourist Board's writings on the subject.

Notwithstanding that the Isle of Arcania was substantially modelled on the Isle of Wight, there are significant differences. You will find no large towns on Arcania, for example. Nor are there electricity pylons, factories, quarries, prisons or major roads (here, admittedly, there is a likeness).

The wizards of Arcania dwell in small, scattered communities, often based on extended family groups. Let's focus on a small, scattered family group.

The Woodmouse family was gathering for tea. The family consisted of three households who each held a little house at three different compass points of the village of Horsebridge: North Horsebridge; North-East Horsebridge; and Nor'-Nor'-East Horsebridge. Pretty much every day they would get together at the biggest of the three little houses, that of Barnaby Woodmouse at North Horsebridge. Barnaby was the head of the Woodmouse clan and one of the Elders of Arcania. Barnaby's wife, Delphine, was just putting the finishing touches to a coffee and walnut cake. This entailed summoning a batch of walnuts from a nearby tree. Unfortunately, walnuts are notoriously undisciplined, and one hit cousin Torquil Woodmouse on the ear just as he arrived.

"Ow!" said Torquil. "That hurt."

"Mmmm?" said Delphine, carefully chopping the walnuts and positioning them prettily.

"Never mind, it could have been worse," said Uncle Piggy, filing in behind Torquil.

"Oh, yes? How, precisely?" said Torquil, raising an eyebrow.

"It could have hit me," said Piggy, his beaming grin almost out-shining the sun's rays reflecting from his hair-free scalp. "Good afternoon, Delphine. It looks like your tea is up to your usual standard."

"Mmmm?" said Delphine, trying to remember where she had put the big teapot.

“Mmmm? Gammahey,” said Delphine’s daughter, Marigold. Actually, she was saying ‘Mum? Get me out of here’ but it was difficult to distinguish as (a) she was in the bathroom and (b) she was inside the big teapot.

After much mirthful magical mayhem, the entire family sat down to tea, all except for Barnaby who was at a Council meeting.

“So, is it true?” asked Aunt Wilhelmina, using the sharp point of her nose to pierce the shell of a boiled egg.

“Is what true, Auntie?” asked Uncle Piggy, for Aunt Wilhelmina was his aunt as well.

“That the island’s shrinking, of course.”

Silence followed these words, broken only by cousin Torquil asking cousin Meriwether to pass the teapot, Marigold spilling the milk and crying over it, Barbara Woodhouse (no relation) telling her dog to stop playing chess at the tea table, and Delphine saying “Mmmm?”.

“You’ve noticed it too, have you?” Piggy asked Wilhelmina.

“Yes, of course. I’m not an idiot. Surely any fool must have noticed by now that something’s happening.”

“Well, I certainly have,” said Torquil. “And what’s worse – we’re becoming visible. I was on the Isle of Wight the other day and I could definitely see the outline of Slowhand Point – it’s quite distinct from the Dorset coast, if you know what to look out for.”

“It’s funny you should say that,” interjected Wellington, Barbara’s dog. “I was over on Durlston Head this morning for walkies, and I overheard a couple of tourists. They were

saying they thought the Isle of Wight was getting closer. Obviously, they didn't know what they were yapping about, but it makes you think, doesn't it?"

"Yes, and I've noticed," said Uncle Piggy, "That it used to take me a good half hour to fly from one side of the island to the other when I was younger – now, it's no more than twenty-five."

"That's because you're more streamlined now, with that massive bald dome of yours," said Torquil, an unpleasant sneer blemishing his otherwise quite hideous face.

Piggy was quite touchy about his lack of hair. You see, wizards don't generally suffer from baldness. Much unkind gossip circulated about the causes of Piggy's condition. Only his closest family knew the real reason, and they never spoke about it. Torquil realised the imprudence of his joke just in time, ducking out of the path of Piggy's curse. Turning, he saw that the head of an undistinguished sculpture of a woodmouse had transformed into a disproportionately large walnut.

"*What* is going on?" called out a commanding voice from the doorway.

"Cousin Barnaby – thank goodness! Your imbecile Uncle just tried to turn my head into a....."

"Ah, Barnaby! Will you please tell your fool of a cousin to keep a civil....."

"Good afternoon, Master Barnaby. Can you remember the *en passant* rule?"

"Oh, sit down, Wellington!"

"Daddy – can you mend this milk jug?"

"Be quiet – all of you!"



“Mmmm?”

The dust settled, the milk jug mended, the woodmouse sculpture returned to normal, and his piece of coffee and walnut cake enlarged, Barnaby Woodmouse sat down to enjoy a peaceful tea.

“Well then, young Barnaby?” Until now, Wilhelmina had said nothing since Barnaby’s return, although she had been eyeing him closely.

“Mmmm?” said Barnaby, chasing an obdurate walnut around his plate.

“Surely, you have something to tell us?”

“Were you expecting anything in particular?” Barnaby returned her gaze, narrowing his eyes in apparent irritation.

“Well, I assume the Council was not continuing its deliberations into teatime just for routine business. You were discussing the crisis, weren’t you?”

This time, silence really did fall around the table. All ears were alert for news.

“Yes,” said Barnaby at length. “Yes, you’re right – although I’d hardly call it a crisis yet.”

“Oh?” said Torquil. “And what would you call it?”

“Oh, it’s a problem, right enough – a significant problem – but nothing we can’t handle.”

“But why is it happening?” asked Piggy. “Does anyone know?”

“Well, we’re setting up a working party to look into that, but there’s no need for alarm. Everything is in hand.”

“But how can it be fixed if no-one knows how it started?” asked Wellington, to several supportive murmurs.

“Ah, but you’re forgetting the power of magic, and the difference between magic and science,” said Barnaby in a reassuring tone. “We can work magic without having the first idea of how or why.”

Aunt Wilhelmina nodded knowingly, although the rest of the group looked unconvinced.

“So?” said Wilhelmina. “How is it to be done?”

“Yes – if the fundamental spells we rely on are unravelling, how on earth can the process be reversed?” asked Piggy.

“We’re doomed. Doomed. I know it,” said Torquil, head in hands.

“Will we have to leave?” whined Wellington. “I’ll lose my power of speech forever if I leave the island.”

“No, no, calm down,” urged Barnaby. “The Elders have found a solution.”

“Yes?”

“What?”

“How?”

“Woof?”

“Go on.”

“It’s a boy,” said Barnaby simply.

A momentary silence followed.

“A boy?”

“What – a sort of boy hero, you mean?”

“A boy who doesn’t even know he’s a wizard yet, maybe?”

“A boy with powers previously unknown?”

“Oh, a *boy*. Of course.”

“Right, well, fair enough then.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Splendid.”

“Anyone else want that last slice of cake?”

“Walkies in a minute, Wellington?”

“Woof!”

“Pass the teapot, would you?”

“A boy – now, why didn’t I think of that?”

“Mmmm?”

THE END

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