

URBAN SPACES

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT



This is a story written almost 700 years ago. It comes from north-west England. The story is a Christian version of a Green Man myth, set in the time of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. The Green Knight seems at first to be a wild man but he tests Sir Gawain's courage and honesty.

King Arthur, his knights and the ladies of the court were celebrating the Christmas festival at Camelot. On New Year's Eve they were all seated in the hall, feasting and making merry. Only the King was not eating, for he had vowed not to eat until someone told an adventurous tale. It was an icy night, and the snow lay thick outside the castle. Suddenly the great doors were flung open and a rush of freezing air swept into the hall. In rode a horse with a gigantic, fierce knight on its back. The knight was dressed all in green, his face, beard and hair were green - and so was his horse. In one hand the knight held a large green axe, and in the other he carried a holly bush.

'Who is the leader among you?' asked the Green Knight in a booming voice.

'I am the Lord of Camelot. You are welcome to join our celebrations,' answered King Arthur. He hoped this strange knight would have some wondrous tales to tell.

But the knight did not dismount from his horse. Sitting high in his saddle he said: 'I offer a challenge. Is any one of you brave enough to accept it, I wonder? This is the challenge: one of you knights may use this green axe to strike my head from my body. In a year and a day the knight must travel to the Green Chapel and accept an axe blow to the neck from me in return.'

The knights sat, still and silent. No-one dared to come forward. King Arthur, to save the honour of his court, stood up to accept the Green

Knight's challenge. Then Sir Gawain, the youngest knight of the Round Table, found his courage. He rose from his seat and said: 'My Lord, please allow me to accept this challenge in your place.'

At this, the Green Knight dismounted from his horse, handed the axe to Sir Gawain, and knelt on the floor. He bent his head, offering his neck to Gawain. Gawain grasped the green axe tightly in his hands. He raised it above his head, swung it down and chopped off the Green Knight's head. The head rolled along the floor. Then everyone gasped with shock, for the Green Knight stood up, picked up his head by its hair and mounted his horse. The head spoke to Sir Gawain: 'Remember that you have agreed to meet me in a year and a day, at the Green Chapel, to receive a return blow from my axe. If you fail, you will be known forever as a coward.' Holding his head under his arm, the green Knight turned and rode out of the hall.

Almost a year passed, and now it was time for Gawain to leave on his long journey to the Green Knight's castle. All the knights were full of sorrow to see him go, for they were sure he would never return to Camelot. He bravely said to them: 'True men can but try.' Sir Gawain dressed himself in full armour, and set off on his horse Gringolet. He carried a red shield with a pentangle painted on it; the pentangle was a star with five points. It stood for truth and it helped to keep his heart strong and true to his faith. He had a long and hard journey, travelling through the hard, cold winter. He met many fierce creatures and had to fight for his life against them.

At last, on Christmas Eve, he knew he was close to the Green Chapel, but he didn't know exactly where it was. He prayed for guidance and crossed himself three times. At once a castle appeared. It was large and beautiful, with a moat, and surrounded by many trees. He rode up to it, crossed the drawbridge, and the gates opened. The lord of the castle, Sir Bercilak, greeted him and invited him to stay for the Christmas feast. After the Christmas celebration, Sir Bercilak asked Sir Gawain: 'What is it that brings you so far from King Arthur's court at Christmas time?' Gawain told him about his appointment at the Green Chapel with the Green Knight. 'I must leave you tomorrow, for I have to search for the Green Chapel,' he said.

Sir Bercilak replied: 'Nay, stay with us until New Year's Eve. The Green Chapel is less than two miles from here. I will send a man to show you the way.' Gawain gladly accepted the invitation.

Then Sir Bercilak said: 'Sir Gawain, tomorrow I am going hunting. You are weary from your travels, so stay here in the castle. You can sleep as long as you wish. Lady Bercilak, my wife, will keep you company. But, to make your visit more interesting, let us make a bargain. When I come back from the hunt, I will give you everything I have caught. In return, you must give me everything you have received during the day.' Sir Gawain agreed to the bargain.

The next morning, Sir Bercilak left for the hunt. Back at the castle, his wife tried to charm Gawain, but all he would give her was a polite kiss. When Sir Bercilak returned, he offered Gawain the deer he had killed. In return, Gawain gave him a kiss.

On the second day, Sir Bercilak went hunting for wild boar. Once again his wife tried to charm Gawain, and again all he gave her was a kiss. That evening, Sir Bercilak gave Gawain the boar he had caught, and Sir Gawain again gave him a kiss.

The third day's hunt was for the sly fox. Gawain knew that this was his last day before he had to face the green Knight. This time, Sir Bercilak's wife gave him not only three kisses, but also a green girdle (belt). She said: 'Wear it under your armour, and it will protect you from harm when you go to meet the Green Knight.' That night, Sir Bercilak gave Gawain a dead fox, and Gawain gave Bercilak the three kisses. He didn't give Sir Bercilak the girdle; he kept it hidden.

The next day, Gawain rode out to meet the Green Knight. As he came near to the Green Chapel, he heard the sound of an axe being sharpened. He knelt down in front of the Green Knight, waiting for the axe to strike him. The Green Knight lifted the newly-sharpened axe, then brought it down towards Gawain's neck. Gawain flinched away from the axe - he could not stop himself - and the green Knight missed. He began to mock Gawain. 'I did not move at all when you struck me at Camelot,' he said. Gawain bent his head again, and this time he stayed still and steady as the axe came down towards him. But there was no blow - the Green Knight had deliberately missed his

neck. Again the *Green Knight* raised the axe, and again Sir *Gawain* knelt still and steady. This time, the axe just nicked *Gawain's* neck, making a small cut. He jumped up and said angrily to the *Green Knight*: 'You've had your chance to cut off my head: it's over now!'

Then the *Green Knight* told *Gawain* that he was Sir *Bercilak*. He had the power to change into the *Green Knight*. The three blows of the axe were for the three times Lady *Bercilak* had tried to charm him. *Bercilak* had not killed *Gawain* because *Gawain* had been honest and true, except about the girdle. The axe had cut his neck because he had accepted the girdle and not told Sir *Bercilak* about it. Sir *Gawain* was ashamed that he had accepted the girdle. He rode back to *Camelot* and wore the girdle for evermore as a symbol of his cowardice.

**Nuffield Primary History:
Urban spaces cross-curricular project**

Editor and author: Jacqui Dean

© in this format Nuffield Primary History 2007
downloaded from www.primaryhistory.org