

The Borders Wizard

The Borders of Scotland is an area steeped in folklore and fantastic stories of fairies and magical goings-on. One such tale is firmly based around a real historical personage - a remarkable man, whether or not you believe the more incredible stories about him. He is Michael Scott - the infamous Borders Wizard.

Through his studies of arcane books Michael is supposed to have tamed demonic forces to his will. His most famous act of wizardry was the reputed splitting of the Eildon Hills into the three peaks that can be seen today towering above the town of Melrose.

He is also credited with the power of prophesy - a gift which haunted him throughout his life. His gift led him to foretell his own death - that he would be killed by a small pebble falling on his head. To avoid his fate Michael had a steel helmet made which covered the crown of his head. However, one day as he attended mass he removed his helmet and, sure enough, a small stone fell from the church ceiling, striking him on the head. He knew that his fate had caught up with him, that it was inescapable - he rapidly descended into a sickness which killed him shortly afterwards.

However, Michael Scott's reputation is much maligned: perhaps suffering from Medieval superstition. He was, in fact, one of the most famous monastic intellectuals of the 13th century, and was even hired to tutor the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II. So skilled was he at translation that his services were sought after by the Pope.

In the great Moorish library of Toledo, Scott translated Aristotle's texts on natural sciences from Arabic into Latin. He was also skilled in Hebrew, mathematics and medicine, and brought much of the knowledge of the East to Christendom.

Quite how Michael became known as a wizard is unknown, but perhaps it was through his translation of an Arabic book called 'The Secret of Secrets'. This was a time when people distrusted knowledge from the east: the Crusades were within people's memories and this type of knowledge was the knowledge of the infidel. So, Michael, as a Christian, with knowledge of these matters, may have been treated with awe by the common people.

According to Sir Walter Scott, writing several hundred years later, Michael was buried, with his books of magic, near a cross at Melrose Abbey - the cross driving away the wizard's demonic followers.

***'I buried him on St Michael's night,
When the bell toll'd one, and the moon was bright,
And I dug his chamber among the dead,
When the floor of the chancel was stained red,
That his patron's cross may over him wave,
And scare the fiends from the Wizard's grave.'***