

6

The Reluctant Chieftain

IT WAS AN EXCITING TIME FOR THE GROUP WHEN they finally arrived at the entrance to the hillfort and pushed open the double gates for the first time. This was to be their home for over a month and a half. All the bedding, equipment and stores were laid out in the roundhouses ready for the volunteers to discover for themselves. Chris Park recalls, 'I remember coming, walking up the hill and seeing the antlers on the gate posts and thinking wow! To see the roundhouses and their kind of organic nature is really nice. And to walk into the place and have a look around and see all the kit that we had – all the tools, all the stores of food – you know, the beds and the materials and the clothes ... I was really, really pleased.'

In general everyone shared these first impressions. Bethan Jones, who knew a little of what to expect from her time working as an education assistant at an Iron Age site, was more relieved than anything. 'It was much better than I expected! It looks cosy, but then again, you know, we have to live here for seven weeks and I suppose things will gradually change as we go along. But the initial impression was much better than I thought it would be. And I thought it was a beautiful site.'

After the initial euphoria, the group had to settle in quickly. All the roundhouses were checked out for cooking utensils and supplies. Baskets of spelt wheat and bowls of dried herbs were discovered in the granary, and hams and a sheep carcass were found hanging in one of the roundhouses. (See Appendix 1, page 182 for a full list of the provisions.) About three days' worth of ready-prepared food was left for them, so a late lunch of bread and cheese was easy to prepare. But the most important job for that afternoon was to elect a chieftain. They had known each other for only twenty-four hours, so people had to go on first impressions. However, the group had a lot to organize before nightfall and it was important that they had a leader to co-ordinate their efforts.

The group gathered around the fire in the centre of the compound to decide the election process. With no paper or pencils allowed on the site (the original Celts

had no written language), some suggested a vote of hands and others a secret ballot with stones being placed in wooden bowls. With everyone talking at once, Chris Park suggested that they should use a 'talking stick' to keep the meeting in order. The idea was that only the person holding the talking stick could speak and it would pass around the group in turn to let everyone have their say. This was a good idea that became very important at later meetings (some of which became very heated), but on this occasion it did not quite catch on as intended. The problem was that not everyone fully understood the concept and some people picked up any small piece of wood left lying around, only to find themselves in verbal competition with the legitimate holder of the talking stick.

It soon became apparent that people were reluctant to put themselves forward for election even if they clearly had designs on the position. During a quiet moment, Yasmin made her feelings clear to Bethan. 'I'd like to put myself forward, but I'd need someone to nominate me. I'm not going to volunteer myself on my own.' Several people felt the same as Yasmin, so it was suggested that only those who positively did *not* want to be chief should raise their hands. This process of elimination left four contenders, as Bethan recalls. 'I knew that Yasmin wanted to be chief. She was very keen. Anne wanted to be chief. David was keen for it, and Chris was willing to be it as well.' Someone pointed out that Chris was a druid and could therefore not be a chieftain (according to the practice of the early Celts), so he stood down and it became a three-way contest. Anne and Chris voted for Dave, Bill voted for his wife Yasmin, and Anne picked up the remaining votes. It was an overwhelming display of confidence in their new chieftain.

Emma Wooster described the general feeling of support for Anne. 'From the start I thought that Anne would be a really good choice of chief. From the outset she was the one that was singing the songs and she seemed to have no inhibitions in that respect – she seemed like a natural performer. It felt like she would be a really good person to front us. I thought it was really nice that we'd chosen a woman because I thought that was quite radical really.'

It was clear that the group did not want a dictatorial leader and elected a mother-figure instead. Ron Phillips summed it up well. 'I don't think anybody wanted to be bossed about and told what to do. They wanted an easy regime, but somebody who would listen and understand and then make her own assumption of what was going on. I think that was Anne's personality right from the word go. She seemed to fit straight into the group and I was certain she would be able to do a chief's job.'

THE SOCIAL ORDER IN THE IRON AGE

Written texts give us a good idea of how Iron Age society was organized, especially in the latter part of the first century BC through to the early part of the first millennium AD. For example, in the second century AD, Ptolemy listed the names of twenty 'tribes' in Ireland and thirty-three in Britain, although the precise numbers varied over time. Each of these tribes was ruled by a leader or chieftain from within a ruling dynasty and an extended family such as this would have lived in a hillfort like Castell Henllys.

Iron Age society had a well-established system of patronage and tribute taxation. The leader might be bound by an oath of allegiance to a higher chieftain or local king. Lower down the tribal pecking order was the noble or warrior class, who swore an oath of allegiance to the local chieftain and would pay a tithe or tax to the leader. The chieftain and nobles might also have owned slaves or 'unfree' workers, perhaps captured during battle. There might also have been a druidic priesthood within a tribe, which would include bards and seers

or diviners. The druids were probably an itinerant class and they alone would have had the freedom to move between the various tribal groups.

The basic social unit of the Iron Age was the extended family, which often spanned as many as four generations. These people were freemen and farmed the land in the immediate vicinity of their farmstead. A freeman would probably be obliged to put his family in a position of 'protective custody' under a member of the warrior class and in return the family would pay a tithe in produce or service to the noble. The tribal aristocracy would also have offered patronage to skilled workers, who included craftsmen such as blacksmiths and bronze-workers as well as teachers, poets, musicians and genealogists.

Within this hierarchical social structure was the facility for decision-making and the tribe would meet during periodic 'fairs' and annual festivals. This was a time when new agreements and alliances were made, marriages arranged, poems recited and general transactions undertaken.

Anne was genuinely surprised by the result of the election and she did harbour private doubts. 'I didn't put forward that I definitely wanted to run, but I said that if everyone thought that I would be a suitable person then I wouldn't refuse ... I was flattered and apprehensive – absolutely!'

The choice of a woman as chieftain certainly had parallels with the Iron Age, although Anne would probably not have been very encouraged by the reputation of some of her predecessors (see overleaf). Although the local chieftains were usually male, the elaborate burials of some high-status women suggest that there were

THE CELTIC WARRIOR QUEENS

Both Boudica and Cartimandua became formidable Celtic leaders at a time when some of the Celtic tribes were in rebellion against the invading Roman forces. Boudica (pronounced *boo-dik-a*, and sometimes spelt Boudicca, but not Boadicea) was arguably the most famous Briton of the time. She was queen of the Iceri, a tribe in East Anglia, and she led an uprising against the Romans in AD 61. Together with other Celtic tribes, she led a huge force against the invaders, burning and slaughtering



△ Anne in party mood, sporting blue woad make-up and her special chieftain's brooch.

as many as 70,000 Romans and pro-Roman Britons as she sacked Camulodunum (Colchester), Verulamium (St Albans) and the new port of Londinium (London). The Romans reorganized their forces and during their counter-attack, 80,000 Britons are said to have been killed. Defeated, Boudica is thought to have poisoned herself.

Although not as well-known as Boudica, Cartimandua was probably even more powerful as she was queen of the Brigantes, one of the biggest and most powerful tribes in northern Britain. She was married to Venutius and they might have ruled jointly, but Cartimandua was ambitious, scheming and thirsty for power. The Brigantes were closely allied to the Romans, but rivalry developed between Cartimandua and Venutius – no doubt fuelled by the affair which the queen was having with her husband's armour-bearer. Venutius led an open revolt against the pro-Roman group and a Roman legion had to be despatched to quell the uprising and rescue Cartimandua. As Tacitus wrote so succinctly in AD 70; 'The throne was left to Venutius, the war to us.'

occasional female rulers. The documentary evidence of such daunting women as Boudica and Cartimandua also supports the likelihood of tribal 'queens'.

