

# JOHN MICHELL

## A MODERN MERLIN

If any one book put 'ley lines' on the map, re-enchanted the British landscape and made Glastonbury the capital of the New Age it was John Michell's seminal 1969 tome *The View Over Atlantis*. On the 40th anniversary of its publication, we celebrate the life and work of its author - a scholar, a visionary and the man who has been called "Britain's unofficial Merlin".

### THE MAN FROM ATLANTIS

**BOB RICKARD** ponders how *The View Over Atlantis*, its precursor *The Flying Saucer Vision* (1967), and its sequel *The City of Revelation* (1971) helped create a new paradigm in our approach to strange phenomena.

This year is the 40th anniversary of the first publication of John Michell's *The View over Atlantis* (VOW), probably the most influential book in the history of the hippie/underground movement and one that had far-reaching effects on the study of strange phenomena. Its central argument was that ancient sites (be they tracks, crossroads, standing stones or holy ground) not only formed ley-like alignments but contained a meaningful structure of number and proportion encoded in their design, and that this 'canon' of number was somehow related to the then new subject of UFOs as well as to the revelation of 'forgotten' knowledge of great significance.

It's hard now, even for those who lived through it, to impart just how intoxicating was that decade straddling the Sixties and Seventies. We were all budding fortune tellers then, eagerly devouring the latest books by Frank Edwards, Harold Wilkins, Pauwels & Bergier, Peter Kolosimo, Robert Charroux, von Däniken, Raymond Drake, Ivan Sanderson, Andrew Tomas, Brad Steiger, John Godwin, Vincent Gaddis... and even Lobsang Rampa. They and many others in

related fields mashed together an intoxicating mix of ancient civilisations, parapsychology, pseudo-mysticism and historical mysteries.

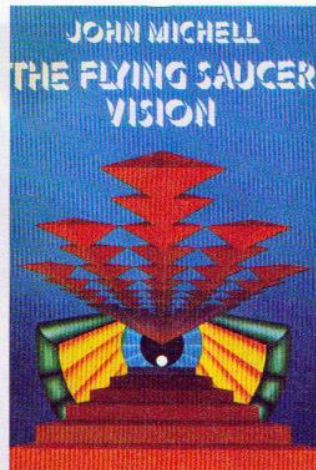
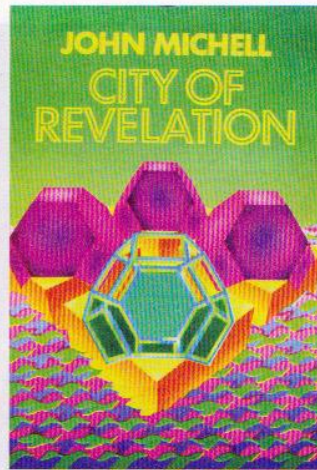
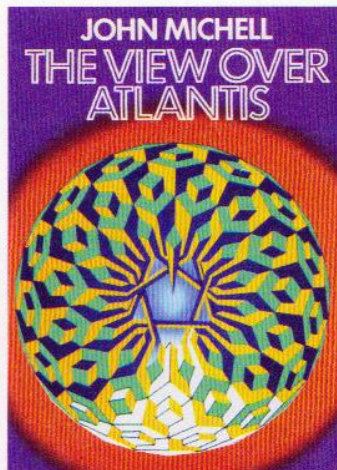
But while these authors piled up exciting facts and speculation, it was John Michell who, using much the same material, forged an intellectual bridge between the distant past and the unfolding present and provided satisfying spiritual nourishment that inspired hippies everywhere.

John opened *View over Atlantis* with a simple example, but he returned to its lesson again and again later. He described how, in 1648, the antiquarian John Aubrey became aware of the Avebury complex as forming a vast ancient temple in the Wiltshire landscape. "It was not hidden... yet Aubrey was the first of his age to notice it." Compare that to Charles Fort's observation on the invention of steam engines: that the principle lay in open view through the ages "until came steam engine time" - that is, until the time or the psychological environment was conducive to the recognition and employment of its revelation. This was heady stuff. It seemed to me as though John,



Plato's Atlantis was a symbol for the internal revelation of a cosmic blueprint





FACING PAGE: John Michell with a measure of the Megalithic Yard, from a portrait by Maxwell Armfield (1881–1972). LEFT: The seminal trilogy. BELOW: John Michell at work in the garden of his house in Bath, c.1979.



PAUL SCREETON

like Fort, came out of nowhere, aglow with his vision, illuminating the land and people around him.

John's works can be seen as concrete expressions of Fort's advice to find things out for one's self, and his books offer deceptively simple proofs, laid out step by step, for anyone to see or to check. Re-discovering the eternal *prima materia* governing the relationship between 'above' and 'below' was John's own vision of the Atlantean message of the celestial mandalas represented by the UFOs. For John, Plato's Atlantis became a symbol for the internal revelation of a cosmic blueprint.

*The View over Atlantis*, its precursor *The Flying Saucer Vision* (FSV) (1967), and its sequel *The City of Revelation* (CoR) (1971), provided a synthesis of and a context for all the other weirdness of the era. It's fair to say that it played a big part in the foundation of *Fortean Times* itself by helping create a readership that wanted more things to think about and a place to discuss them. The overall effect was to help the burgeoning interest in strange phenomena spread out into mainstream culture.

In that social and psychological upheaval of the era – a maelstrom of new things in art and music, drama and drugs – John Michell

was a calm centre, wise as well as knowledgeable, always thoughtful and with piercing eyes that had seen 'other', more splendid things.

And these three books of his seemed to bring it all together. Not only did they directly inspire the Glastonbury Fayre of 1971 (which grew into the Glastonbury Festivals of more recent years), but they also established and sanctified the relationship between a myriad of subjects, which seemed then to make sense logically, mystically, and spiritually.

John's work branched off in numerous directions, and the 'canon' he had rediscovered underpinned everything from

crop circles, spontaneous forms in Nature and tribal monarchism to 'driven' outsiders, long-lost rings, and the library angel phenomenon by which crucial ideas are revealed by accident or 'coincidence'.

So much of what we now take for granted as the familiar landscape of alternative culture – from leys and free festivals to the rediscovery of Britain's sacred sites and the birth of the New Age – sprang directly from these three seminal works by John Michell. Through them – and indeed, through all of John's subsequent writing and painting – shines the dedication of a true scholar-visionary and a genuine prophet.

## THE OLD STONES OF NOTTING HILL

John Michell's work was a key influence on the late Sixties scene in Britain. **GARY LACHMAN** depicts the cultural and social milieu Michell moved in at the time he wrote his first three books.

John Michell was an odd character to form part of the Rolling Stones' entourage. A retiring scholar of curious knowledge with a peculiar obsession with Plato, mathematics and geometry, he was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge, then came to London in the duffel-coated days of the Fifties. For a while, he worked as an estate agent – a mundane pre-echo of his fascination with sacred landscape, which provided some choice property in Notting Hill. He also painted, exhibited and worked in a gallery. It was through this connection that he met Michael Rainey, who later introduced him to the pleasures of Courtfield Road (then the residence of Brian Jones and Anita Pallenberg), where his ideas became quite

influential. As Marianne Faithfull recalls of Brian Jones: "Like a lot of people at the time, myself included, he was convinced there was a mystic link between druidic monuments and flying saucers. Extraterrestrials were going to read these signs from their spaceship windows and get the message. It was the local credo: Glastonbury, ley lines and intelligent life in outer space..."

Michell became a regular on the Notting Hill Gate scene and continued to live in the area in an archetypal artist's garret, not far from Powis Square, the address of Turner's (Mick Jagger) dilapidated mansion in the film *Performance*. Michell came late to writing, publishing his first book at 35. His reason for taking up the trade was a dwindling



ABOVE: 1969, John Michell in the study of science-fiction writer Thom Keyes.

GABI NASEMAN





## A pyramid stage was built according to the specifications of Michell's canon

inheritance, spent on high living. All that was left to him was "pondering the delights and works of the ancient sages", and the "noble mentalities" that these works reflect.

And from such activities, a vision came to Michell. Long before the rise of modern civilisation with its emphasis on technology, progress and unrestricted use of natural resources, there was an earlier one, in tune with nature, aware of the Earth force, and conscious of humanity's place in the cosmos. The English countryside, Michell realised, was not merely a pleasant landscape of rolling hills, forests and queer old ruins. It harboured the remains of an ancient civilisation, a vast, panoramic structure that had hitherto escaped notice precisely because of its size. The 'Atlantis' of the title of Michell's book was not the ancient lost continent, sunk beneath the ocean, but this

forgotten science of our ancient ancestors.

Understandably, *The View over Atlantis* was a hit, even though a great deal of it is taken up with some very abstruse mathematics, the canons of sacred geometry that formed the subject of Michell's next book, *City of Revelation* (1971). The book was popular because in it Michell said that at places like Glastonbury – constructed, like Stonehenge and the pyramids, according to ancient rules of form and measurement – it was possible once again to commune with the natural rhythms, to feel the pulsations of the Earth force, and participate in the raising of Atlantis. The original foundation of the Abbey, Michell claimed, represented the Holy City prophesied in the *Book of Revelation*. All this appealed to the hippies, and in 1970 they took him at his word and descended on the place, trailing leys, touching



HENRIETTA MORAES

TOP: The first Glastonbury Fayre in 1971, complete with pyramid.

ABOVE: In 1973, an exodus of hippies left west London for the rural life as travellers. This group, led by Henrietta Moraes and Mark Palmer took four years to reach Wales. John Michell can be glimpsed behind a horse at the back.

stones and feeling the vibrations along the way.

Glastonbury, a sleepy Somerset town that over the years had endured a negligible influx of spiritual types and anorakish antiquarians, had suddenly become New Age Central, as if the spores from London boutique *Gandalf's Garden* had been blown in by the wind and taken hold. On the 1971 summer solstice, the Glastonbury festivals began. On a pyramid stage, one-tenth the size of Cheops's, built according to the specifications of Michell's sacred canon, and situated at the apex of major leys, groups such as Traffic, Hawkwind and David Bowie played to thousands of people.

According to Andrew Kerr, organiser of the original festival, the idea was to "create an increase of awareness of the power of the Universe, a heightening of consciousness and a recognition of our place in the function of this tired and molested planet... we're going to concentrate the celestial fire and pump it into the planet to stimulate growth".

But by that time the Sixties had ended and the Seventies were here. The magical revolution was over.

Extracted and adapted from *Turn Off Your Mind* (2001), Gary Lachman's account of "the mystic Sixties and the dark side of the age of Aquarius".



# THE TIMES OF THE SIGNS

Eighteen years after the first publication of *The View over Atlantis*, JOHN NICHOLSON wrote possibly the best retrospective view of the impact of John Michell's early writings. What follows has been extracted and adapted from Nicholson's essay, 'The Times Of The Signs', which appeared in *An English Figure* (Bozo, 1987).

John once referred to his role as an agent of transformation, likening himself to "a cosmological switchman" who is hunting for the "one right switch to effect an immediate revolution in cosmology".

His first book, *The Flying Saucer Vision* (FSV) dealt with the idea of a cosmological switch brought about by flying saucers. The appearance of UFOs, like the atom bomb, was seen by the late 1950s as proof of the New Epoch. By 1959, a new lore had grown to such proportions that the eminent psychologist Carl Jung made an analysis of "a modern myth of things seen in the skies".

Jung saw UFOs as a further confirmation of his theory of archetypes – that there are basic patterns or images in human experience which find their expression or manifestation in all ages and cultures. Jung called these archetypes 'psychic dominants' instead of the name they used to have: *gods*. Due to the pressure of orthodoxy, it was more acceptable to believe in UFOs than in divinities. With UFOs, the need to transcend – the basis of religious experience – had been transposed into a semi-scientific atmosphere. UFOs were thus acceptable to those who scorned mysticism. Devotees could believe in the notion of human beings taken

away by aliens in spacecraft, but would ridicule the possibility that a superhuman or divine entity might spirit away men and women.

Underneath Jung's rhetoric lay the conflict between the traditional, religious approach and the proselytising new faith in Science and Reason, still confident that the Atomic Age would bring the promised Utopia. UFOs were a good test case because, according to Jung, "the reasonable opinion of the majority" regarded belief in UFOs as a sort of collective madness. Therefore, UFOs offered the chance to show how a superstition, a myth, originated. UFOs could be used as a metaphor to show how and why people believe in the divine or the ineffable. The supernatural had already been reduced to the realm of madness and now the new superior wisdom, psychology, would at last be able to bring about "long-lasting transformations of the collective psyche".

Michell, in *The Flying Saucer Vision*, took Jung's remarkable essay as his starting point, but for him "[T]he reappearance of flying saucers and our reawakening interest in extra-terrestrial life represents a return to an orthodoxy temporarily abandoned." This turns Jung upside down. For Jung "inexplicable opinions, beliefs, illusions or visions" should be seen as signs of "psychic disturbance"; Jung does not deny such things occur, or that they are 'natural'. What his philosophy requires is a break in the causal claim that traditionally links such phenomena to a divine or external agency.

Aldous Huxley had explored the idea of hallucinatory drugs as a way of opening "the doors of perception" and by the mid-1960s thousands were taking trips across this threshold. Some never came back and those who did

brought tales of such wonder or horror that their lives could never be the same. Like people who saw UFOs, these 'heads' had indelible experiences. They told of strange lights, colours and sounds, and spoke of alien senses such as being able to read minds by touch or just by a person's 'vibrations'. Their sense of awareness was so intense they felt they were experiencing

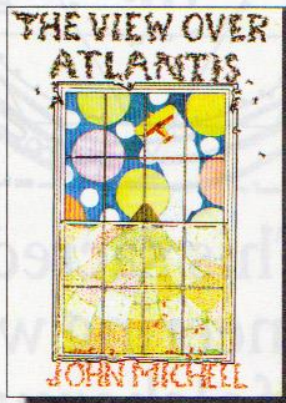
the Universe. As those who experienced UFOs began to see with the 'flying saucer vision', so these drugs that affected the psyche produced a psychedelic consciousness. There was an urgency to spread the gospel to save the world.

Around the world, the new contactees numbered millions. An enormous amount of imaginative energy was poured into creating the new music. In turn, it energised a generation. An example of the mixture was the Jimi Hendrix Experience, which was so steeped in the imagery of UFOs and other worlds that there was a popular legend that as Hendrix played UFOs were sighted hovering over the stage, helping him to perform their freaked-out music. That another cult – drugs – claimed him as its agent only illustrates how UFOs and out-of-the-mind experiences had become interchangeable.

John saw the origin of human intelligence as one in a series of quantum leaps: "Universal traditions emphasise that the ancient system of knowledge did not come about in the course of evolution, but first appeared in its highest and most perfect form as an instant revelation from the gods." For John, the moment when wisdom is transmitted is a transcendental one. Like the supreme act of creation, it can only occur in a flash as a revelation, "a moment of magical inspiration, the coming of the Holy Ghost".

The work of Alexander Thom, in books like *Megalithic Sites in Britain* (1967) and *Megalithic Lunar Observatories* (1971) provided John with the necessary mathematical proofs to justify his theory of the purpose of ancient sites. It was beyond dispute that the sites were arranged in relation to the heavens, and despite the detailed arithmetic and geometry the implication was simple: there were lines projecting from the stones to the stars. This gave a revelatory importance to the lines that connected the sites and formed "the geometry of the country".

In *The Flying Saucer Vision*, not much space was given to these lines that John was to become so identified with, just a hint in a cryptic footnote: "*Lung mei*, straight lines linking the places associated with the dragons, have recently been traced



GABI NASEMAN

ABOVE: Surveying the Old Stones of Land's End, Spring 1971. John Michell (immediately to left of stone) in Cornwall with friends Gabi Naseman, Noshier and others.

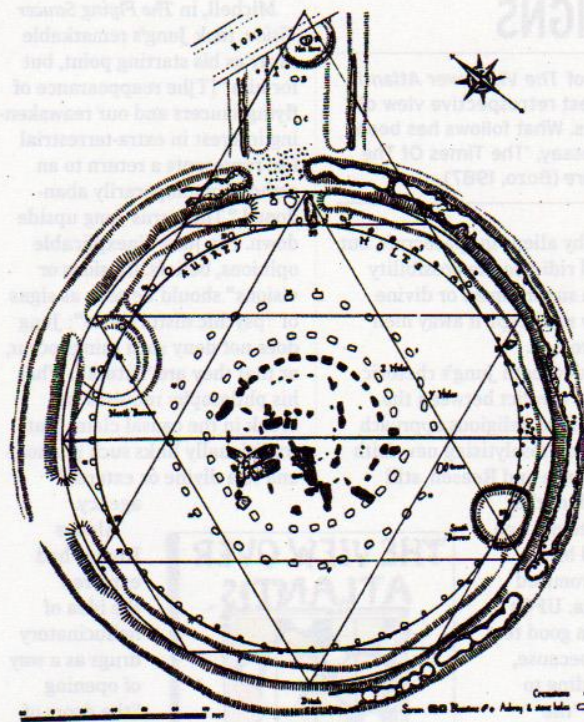


in Britain." In *FSV*, he discussed the idea that there were other forms of power by which UFOs flew: "not by engines, but by some natural forces we have not yet discovered". In fact, he contradicted this by showing how widespread were cases of flight by humans such as druids, saints or witches, without any devices or engines. "The belief that sound can cause levitation is old and universal," and John suggested that the stones of the pyramids and Stonehenge were raised by such methods. If harmonious arrangement was capable of producing notes or tones of this strength, then what if the geometry of the Earth were laid out in similar patterns? Could it also be used to lift and power craft such as UFOs? Was there a sort of celestial tramline of inaudible energy along which it was possible to fly to and from the sites?

*The View over Atlantis* reversed that emphasis: the lines are the key and the UFOs incidental. Now, the heralds who warned Man are no longer so important. "I think it is time we stopped trying to convince non-believers [about the existence of UFOs] and began to turn our attention to what it is they are pointing out to us." He was now sure they pointed at "the revelation concealed within the landscape itself", not new but "so huge and obvious that we have overlooked it".

Next John repeated his central theme: "The instrument of all human enlightenment is an educated mind illuminated by revelation", providing example after example of such epiphanies. In particular, John had found a purpose for the landscape code in the Chinese geomantic system of *feng shui*. As he had linked the dragon paths of China with the leys of Watkins, so he suggested similarities between the geomancers of China and European magic, especially alchemy and astrology as they had been practised in their heyday during the Renaissance.

Indeed, John's call for a Reformation – or a Restoration – of the Earth and the Heavens is reminiscent of those appeals for cosmic transformation that characterised the Renaissance. *VOA*, with its vision of celestial essences pulsating through all living matter in the Universe, is worthy of Jakob Boehme. It is the traditional ecstasy that is



## This sacred engineering was a sort of alchemy on a cosmic scale

eternally recognised by mystics and magicians. A holy land is seen stretched out below by a god in the skies who watches rays of divine love streaming to infinity.

This "sacred engineering" was the purpose of the code; it was a sort of alchemy on a cosmic scale. *VOA* showed how such a possibility, far from being John's fancy, had been recognised in other times and places; it was known to mystical antiquarians like Stukeley and Blake. *Feng shui* showed this result was not accidental but due to the use of sacred engineering, for *Feng Shui* was a carefully recorded system of how to harmonise the Universe and everything in it.

First published in 1969, *VOA* proved to be "the right book at the right time", even more than *FSV*. It gave the New Agers a framework and a programme of practical action. Now they saw not only with the flying saucer vision but also with an Atlantean view. Hippies turned themselves into the new

guardians of ancient skills and wisdom by rejecting industrial society and communing at old sites or going for mystical nature rambles along leys, keeping an eye open for UFOs. Like Red Indians, they touched the Earth and felt the stones giving off psychic energies or 'vibes'. Pop groups privately gave invocatory performances at the chosen time and place. It was all mixed up somehow as cosmic consciousness and it gave many people happy hours... all of them charged-up by John's book.

*View over Atlantis* spoke of "vast crystalline shapes" visible in the landscape. In his third book, *City of Revelation (CoR)* John provided a synthesis of his first two books by crystallising his ideas. It was as if pillars of light drove up from the framework he had laid out to form the ultimate symbol: the holy city. Ideas came off the page like psychedelic devices to shimmer through the consciousness of his readers. I deliberately use extravagant language here in

LEFT: The sacred geometry derived from Stonehenge.

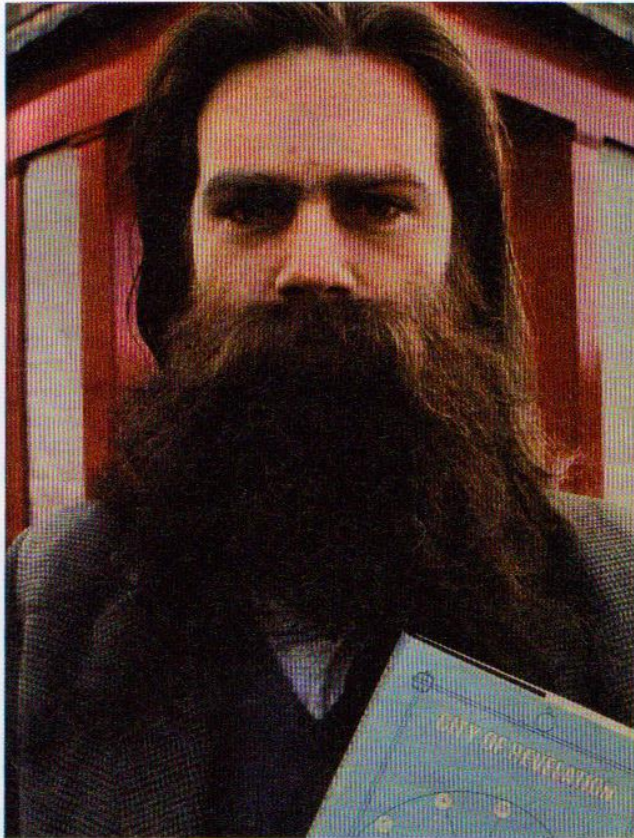
an effort to recreate the impact John's early works had on their admirers. They not only caused the flash which illuminates hidden vistas but re-transmitted the experience so that they triggered flashes in the minds of his readers. For many, the discovery of John's ideas was to be an indelible experience, opening their minds to wonder.

Despite this emotional response to his work, John was becoming more exacting and precise. *City of Revelation* abounds in shapes, measures, numbers, proportions and harmonies. From the figures spread across the landscape, he turned to the figures that unlock all codes: numbers. In a way Numerology plays the same role as UFOs and leys, but it goes further: it is the key to unravel all the secrets of Earth and Heaven.

Michell also uses the cabbalists' code of gematria, which breaks down language to individual letters and assigns them numerical equivalents. In fact, this is one part of an incredibly complex system, or systems, which have been used for centuries. As early as 1300, the mystic Ramon Lull had devised a series of wheels as a kind of early computer to integrate his variations as he attempted to reconcile Christian, Jewish, Moslem and Gnostic values. John's attempt to 'square the circle' mixed the Holy City of Jewish-Christian apocalyptic tradition with the Ideal State of Plato's *Republic*. The 'doctrine of signatures' was obligatory for astrologers, magicians and doctors, while poetic myth, as explored by Robert Graves, adds more parallels in flowers, trees, herbs, colours, sounds, gems... This infinity of permutations applied to everything in the Universe, from its innermost structure to the outer stars. The idea, mentioned in *FSV*, of harmonics linked to a power that enabled flight was now put into a larger structure. All the ancient holy sites, not only Stonehenge and the Pyramids, evidenced this code. Their successors, the cathedrals, had not only inherited the sites but also were instruments that expressed this magical canon.

On the surface, *City of Revelation* was harder to assimilate. Anybody could draw lines on a map, but calculating numbers





ABOVE: The two Johns: John Nicholson outside the Arcana Bookshop, Cambridge, 1972, holding a copy of *City of Revelation*, and the book's author.

demanded mental effort. The other immediate impression was conveyed by the diagrams: number expressed geometrically produced powerful images. Even those ignorant of the origin of these patterns might, as with leys, think they were not seeing something new but being reminded of something with which they had always been familiar on an instinctive level. Jung's archetypes again provide a starting point as the diagrams have a harmonious effect reminiscent of mandalas – the circles of power to which Jung had likened flying saucers. In the diagrammatic codes of *City of Revelation*, John evoked the seals or pentacles used in magic ritual. This is not far-fetched, as John's use of Number also relies on 'magic squares' and on the cabbalistic system.

Two new permutations arise: 1) That the lines described in VOA are not random but form recognisable patterns. By the same token, the symbols of magic are codified versions of the patterns laid on the Earth. 2) That there is an even deeper pattern that takes us into the structure of language via Number. Here John is working in that part of the Platonic tradition followed by Gnostics,

alchemists and Neoplatonists. By using Number in this mystical way, he could demonstrate these truths. As he had used UFOs, leys, and Atlantis as symbols, so the ultimate ambition of squaring the circle could stand for the reconciling of the irreconcilable. Contradictory or opposing phenomena could have the same number: 666, for instance, was both the number of the Beast and of Christ.

Another reversal of a different shape was discernable. Archaeological orthodoxy was switching under various attacks, including that of the Michelians. One battle was over the suggestion that certain sites have a much older history than generally thought; because they had been adapted by Christianity, there had been a literal cover-up. As the sites showed evidence of superior mathematical ability, QED, primitive man was not ape-like but intelligent; he was our superior. This fitted with

John's original proposition, as the people of the past were now revealed to be as alien as the aliens from elsewhere who had transmitted the spark of intelligence. Another piece of the pattern was also confirmed: that the wisdom has always been here, waiting to be unearthed when the time is ripe.

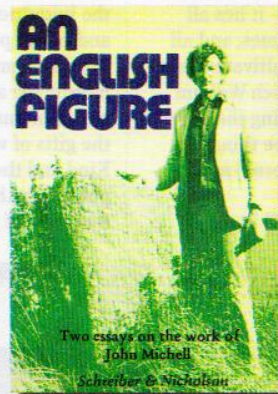
Challenged that his ideas were fancies because leys were projections (like Jung's UFOs) of an overactive imagination, John produced a meticulously documented case study of *The Old Stones of Land's End*. Yet the opposition was itself in disarray, as he noted in the preface to a new

edition of a Victorian study of another megalithic complex, Maeshowe, Orkney's finest chambered cairn. "For many years until quite recently, the theory that the ancient inhabitants of Britain practised the science of astronomy and erected megalithic structures for that purpose

was bitterly disputed by almost every respectable archaeologist. Modern research has, however, established beyond doubt that such was indeed the case, and the further surprising evidence has emerged from the new, refined techniques of dating ancient artefacts, that the stone monuments of Britain, Scandinavia and Brittany are older than those of southern Europe, the Mediterranean and Egypt. The long held orthodox belief that civilization spread from Egypt or Mesopotamia to northern Europe is thus reversed."

John Michell's work was a cause of the breakout rather than the result. During the 1970s, he still had to fight against orthodoxies that declared him heretical. His work can be seen as a symbol of the eternal struggle of the human spirit to be free, whether from the ice-age of the pre-Sixties or of the Eighties. It proves that, like toads imprisoned in rock, a metamorphosis is possible. John is still creating celestial cities that shimmer above and around us eternally.

Readers interested in the full text are encouraged to contact BOZO Press, 11 Ashburnham Road, Bedford MK40 1DX, enclosing £5 cash (inclusive of p&p).





## A MODERN ARCADIAN

**PATRICK HARPUR** shares with us a glimpse of John Michell in Glastonbury, and finds a man and his philosophy in perfect harmony.

On my first visit to Glastonbury, John Michell offered to show me round. When I saw him bathing his myopic eyes in the waters that flow from Chalice Well, I asked him if he was doing this to improve his sight. "Yes," he replied with kindly irony. "Only, here in Glastonbury, you know, we tend to call it vision." It's difficult to describe John's vision in a few words because, while it is a single revelation, it is also many-layered, subtle and, to the occasional bemusement of his many admirers, apparently contradictory. But this is no more than you would expect of such an oxymoronic creature as a 'radical traditionalist'. An essential part of this self-description is always to act as a corrective when imbalance appears. What John defends in the face of scoffers, he attacks in the face of believers. While everyone was reading the 'little red book' of the mass-murderer Mao, John was busy publishing *The Hip-Pocket Hitler*. "As a philosopher," he has reminded us, "you have to be ruthlessly perverse."

John's thinking is startling and fresh because it doesn't suffer from any illusions of being new and progressive. This does not mean that he isn't forward-looking, far from it, for – as the Renaissance magi recognised – all 'new ages' are revivals of an older, more Golden Age; all forward-looking thought is drawn from the springs of the past. But what sort of past?

WH Auden was fond of distinguishing between Utopians, who compel us ethically towards their New Jerusalem where everyone will be happy and good (or else); and Arcadians, who recruit us imaginatively into their Eden where everyone is happy and loveable. John is an Arcadian. All are welcome there, as in his flat, where he taught me by his inspiring example to relish monsters and suffer fools gladly. If he sometimes places his Arcadia in the future, it is not a Utopian project of social engineering but a restoration of the primordial order of the past. It is the Earthly paradise – which he characterises in a number of

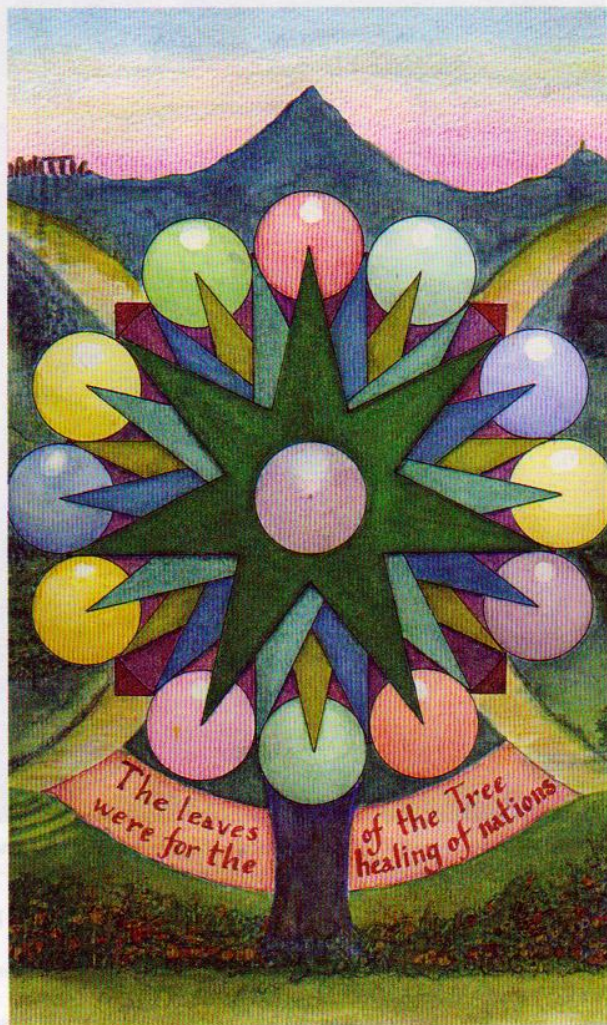
ways.

In one way, it is of course the immediate past. "The world has changed so thoroughly," he has written, "that I hardly recognise it as the same place I grew up in." Then, in a characteristic switch, he adds: "UFOs, spacemen and crop circles had never been heard of in those days, and it was possible to meet any number of American ladies without learning about their abduction experiences and extra-terrestrial brain implants."

In another way, it is the Merrie England of other Arcadians such as William Cobbett, whom John especially likes, where (as he has written in the *Oldie*) "every village had its dynastic farmers and craftsmen, its sporting heroes, beauty queens and aged wiseacres, its own customs, stories, music, style of dancing and way of speaking. In its ancient manor house a dimly noble family upheld the local economy and culture. Long summer days passed happily, uneventful; mid-winter was a time of fun and festival; and there was plenty of the best for all." Rather like life on his chum Nosh's roomy boat, moored at the riotous Barge Inn during the crop circle season.

In a third way, the Earthly paradise does not lie with the social order at all – it lies all around us, at all times, and all we have to do is cultivate that imagination of which William Blake spoke, opening the doors of perception to see things as they really are: eternal and divinely ordered.

Farther back still in the



ABOVE: *The New Jerusalem*, by John Michell. BELOW: Arcadia in Glastonbury.

nested hierarchy of Arcadias can be found John's vision of the idyll before so-called civilisation and settlement, before the iniquities of priestcraft and power politics, when we were all nomads on a perpetual pilgrimage around the sacred places of our land, receiving the gifts of whatever Dame Kind and the local spirits were putting forth at that place at that time of year.



Most profoundly, John's Arcadia is a mystical entity generated by divinely laid-down number and proportion, such as he himself has discovered in such diverse places as the architecture of Stonehenge, Plato's *Laws* and the *Book of Revelation*. Like the Demiurge himself, John has in his many works recreated this divine cosmos for our delectation; and then, as if infusing it with the soul of the world, set it, through his beautiful writing, dancing.

As we walked slowly back down Glastonbury High Street after my day of revelations, every third passer-by greeted John with affection and delight. An American in running gear sped past, stopped, spun around. "Hey, John! Great to see you, man."

"I see you are running."

"Yeah – and I've lost 12 pounds," he added proudly.

"Oh dear," said John. "Nothing serious, I hope?"



# THE GEOMETRY OF CREATION

**ALLAN BROWN** offers a preview of John Michell's next book, a grand synthesis of his previous explorations of the mysterious canon of symbolic geometry.

I've known John Michell for several years now, and have recently completed work with him on a book of his artwork called *How the World Is Made: The Story of Creation according to Sacred Geometry*. Originally, publishers Thames and Hudson had commissioned John to produce a straight art book of his paintings, with simple titles and accompanying captions, but John was averse to such an idea. He doesn't see himself as an artist, or his paintings as artworks. To him they are simply illustrations of geometrical truths.

In *How the World Is Made*, John explains, and illustrates, how the Universe came into being according to these truths that are discovered readymade in nature – truths that hold good at all times and in all places, and are older than the world itself. It's a symbolic cosmology, yet it hangs together so cohesively and comprehensively that we can but conclude that he is right in his assertion that this creation story, written in the language of mathematics, is really the only enduring cosmology that we have. At its heart lies the figure of the 'Heavenly City', which was revealed to both Plato and St John, amongst others. The Heavenly City, or the 'New Jerusalem', is a geometrical construction in which the primary numbers and fundamental forms of mathematics are symbolically united in the figure of the squared circle. This mystical construction serves to balance the paradoxical dichotomies of a material creation with its creator, the Great Geometer. The Heavenly City forms the spine through all John's work. His studies of Plato, Stonehenge, the Great Pyramid, Glastonbury, ancient metrology and music all ultimately lead back to this figure. It is a revelation in a time when revelations appear to be anachronisms.

Through John's eyes, we see that Plato's ideal city is a parable about number and geometry, just as Atlantis is a parable about the folly of neglecting to honour these timeless, governing principles and the resulting calamities that befall such a civilisation – an analogy not unlike the world situation in which we currently

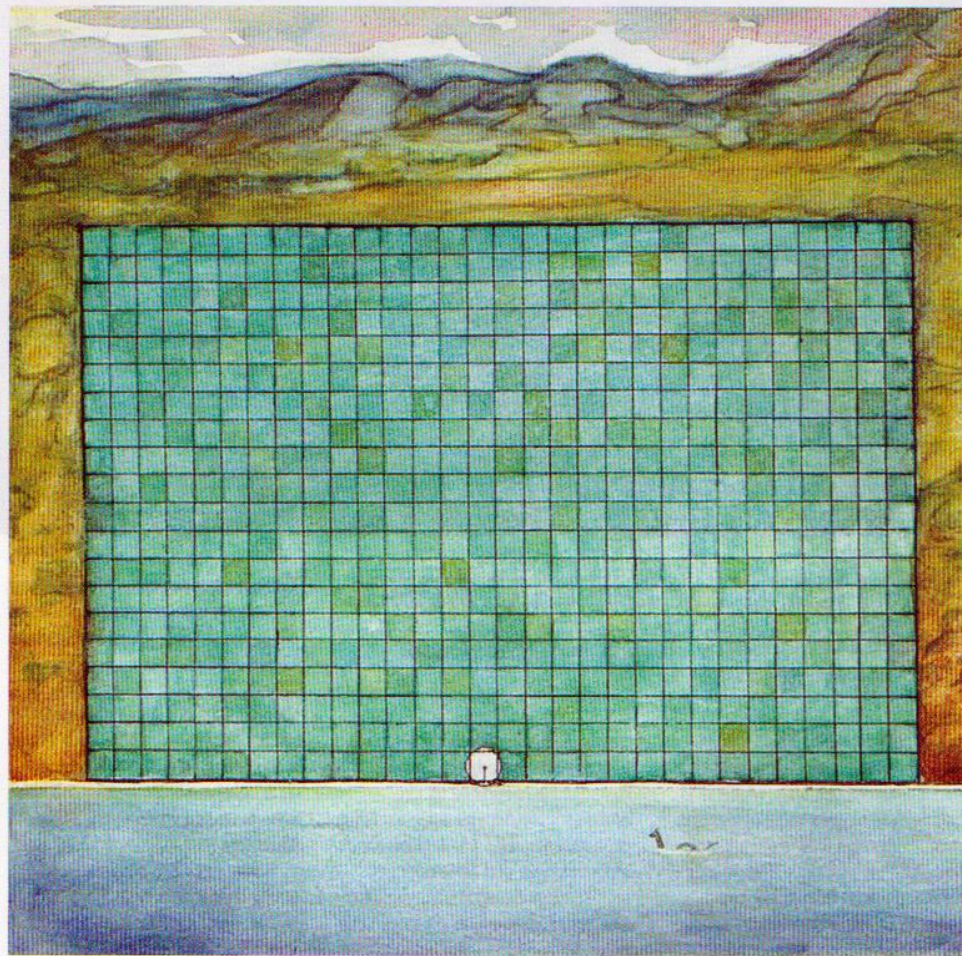
find ourselves. In the light of this reading, Plato's bewildering musings become clear; his technical treatises contain all the information needed to recreate accurately the symbolic cities that he refers to. To these ends, aided by the computer, we were able to draw a detailed diagram of Atlantis, possibly the first time

it's been rendered since some poor scribe at Plato's Academy was given the onerous task of doing it by hand. A close study of this figure, along with the specific dimensions that Plato gives us in his text, reveals that the resulting squared circle is defective and fails to achieve the perfection contained in the alternative construction of *Magnesia*, the New Jerusalem or the Heavenly City.

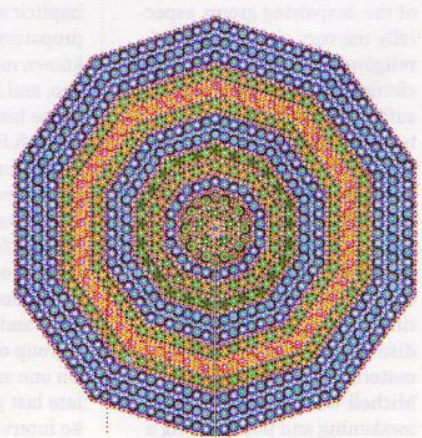
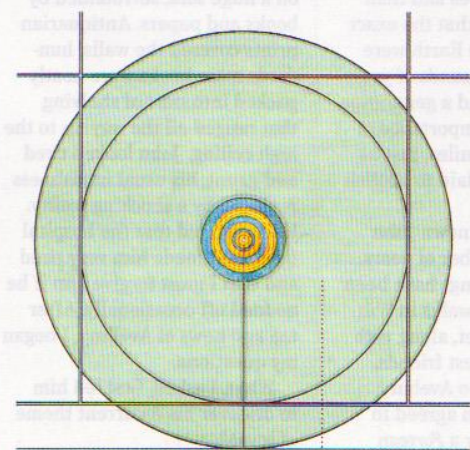
Atlantis is based on the pentagram, five – traditionally that's us, human beings – but, as it is built on human desires and reasoning, it must ultimately

collapse. We ignore the natural order at our peril, but there's no need to be pessimistic. The Heavenly City is a process. It's always there beneath the surface, waiting to manifest. It's not a human invention, as it reveals itself to anyone who begins playing around with a compass and straight edge.

**ABOVE:** The dimensions of Atlantis, derived from Plato's description; an enlarged view of the city (from the bottom centre of the first drawing; and a closer view (from the centre of the previous drawing).



ALL THREE PIX: JOHN MICHELL







## JOHN MICHELL: THE LAST WORD

STEVE MARSHALL spends a day with John Michell, looking back over a lifetime's work.

"It seems to be a rule," wrote Ted Hughes, "that the shamanic visitation occurs only when it is needed. It occurs only at certain moments – typical moments of breakdown or crisis. The lesser shamans heal and solve problems with transcendental help. The great shaman, typically, gathers up the whole tradition of the despairing group, especially the very earliest mythic/religious traditions, with all the circumstances of their present sufferings, into a messianic, healing, redemptive vision on the spiritual plane."

Hughes was actually referring to Shakespeare, the great shaman of Elizabethan England, but his words could equally describe John Michell's timely reaction to the social disintegration and rampant materialism of the 1960s. Michell was responsible for re-awakening and popularising a

dormant and peculiarly British mysticism – one based on an instinctive response to the country's landscape and ancient monuments. His 1971 book *City of Revelation* put Glastonbury on the world's mystical map; he resurrected the almost forgotten science of Metrology – the study of ancient measures and their implicit message that the exact proportions of the Earth were known many thousands of years ago; and he alerted a generation to the historical importance of English feet and miles, just as plans were being laid to abolish them forever.

Although I've known John Michell for a number of years, most of our meetings have been on archaeological walks in Wiltshire and Somerset, along with a group of his oldest friends. On one such trip to Avebury late last year, John agreed to be interviewed for a *Fortean*

*Times* retrospective of his career. When news came that he'd been diagnosed with terminal cancer, I assumed the interview would be off, but John insisted we should still go ahead, though with a tacit understanding that what we'd originally planned as a celebration would perhaps now be more in the way of an obituary.

So it was with some trepidation that I climbed the stairs to his Notting Hill flat. The door was open and John reclined on a huge sofa, surrounded by books and papers. Antiquarian prints covered the walls; hundreds more books were neatly packed into tiers of shelving that ranged all the way up to the high ceiling. John looked tired and gaunt, his usual impishness replaced by a shocking frailty. He explained that the hospital treatment made him very tired and that I must forgive him if he nodded off occasionally. After tea and news of Avebury, I began my questions.

What, I asked, first led him to discover his recurrent theme of leys?

"Flying saucers were very much the thing in 1966, and I used to attend UFO meetings in Warminster and London. My first book *The Flying Saucer Vision* came out in 1967 but I wrote it in '66 – twice, actually, as I lost the original manuscript and had to start again! But as always, it was much better the second time. I think I was the first to take the Jungian view of UFOs. Anyway, at a meeting in Warminster, Jimmy Goddard made some mention of 'ley lines' and the idea that flying saucers might travel along them. I'd never heard of leys, so I got *The Old Straight Track* out of the library. Alfred Watkins was long forgotten and his work appealed to me immediately. There was a strong antiquarian feel about it, but he wrote about this strange new concept in a plain-speaking, factual way that touched me."

Watkins, I suggested, also shared Michell's flair for intuitive revelation.

"Yes, that's true – the idea that Britain was covered in an ancient network of lines was revealed to Watkins in a flash.





He had a sudden vision of it all laid out before him. I liked that a lot."

Did he next, I wondered, set about discovering leys for himself? And did he see any UFOs?

"Both, actually," replied John. "There were lots of trips to Herefordshire, exploring the alignments that Watkins had found and more. I remember also seeing lots of UFOs around Glastonbury and Wells. Just distant lights in the sky, moving about like goldfish in a bowl."

*The Flying Saucer Vision* was a successful book. What was it like to become suddenly famous?

"Oh, I was never famous!" he exclaimed. "I achieved a certain notoriety..."

But didn't he become part of the Rolling Stones entourage?

"No! But I knew Mick quite well, and some of the others."

I recalled a story I'd heard second-hand, about John's introduction to the dark side of rock and roll mysticism: a daunting experience that convinced him to stay with the light.

## "I remember seeing lots of UFOs around Glastonbury, moving about like goldfish"

"Ah yes, there was a trip to Hereford," he replied, reluctant to be drawn. "I went up to look at some of Watkins's leys and do a bit of UFO spotting. With Keith Richards, Anita Pallenberg, Christopher Gibbs and Kenneth Anger. It was, erm... interesting..."

Syd Barrett was also alleged to have had a keen interest in leys and Glastonbury. Was John involved with the early Pink Floyd?

"No, not really. But I did come up with the name for that club where they used to play."

The UFO club.

As someone who has spent most of his life obsessed with number, did he, I inquired,

show an early flair for maths?

"Not at all!" he laughed. "I read Russian and German at Cambridge. Russian literature was my thing. Then I messed around as an estate agent for a while. I was in my early 30s when I finally began to write. I knew nothing of maths or geometry until I taught myself - insofar as it needs teaching."

Michell's second book *The View Over Atlantis* appeared in 1969, and became a virtual blueprint for the New Age. He elaborated on leys and announced the discovery of a 'Saint Michael Line' that ran all the way through southern England, passing through Glastonbury Tor and countless

prehistoric monuments, as well as the many churches that are dedicated, curiously, to Saint Michael. He introduced the concept of a 'sacred geometry' encoded in monuments ranging from prehistoric stone circles to Victorian churches; also the gematria - a mystical correspondence between letters and numbers that is found in the Cabala and the writings of Ancient Greece. With its wild range of themes, the book met with a mixed reception. John gleefully produced for me some of his bad reviews. "A blunderbuss fired off in all directions," said one. Geoffrey Grigson described it as "one of the dottiest books to have appeared for some while". Undaunted, Michell responded with *City of Revelation* which was, if anything, even wilder - now introducing the canon of number, the geometry of the New Jerusalem and his first forays into the study of ancient measures. But central to all this was the town and abbey of Glastonbury, with the secrets of the Ancients encoded into its



ground plans and dimensions. This was the book that cemented Glastonbury's reputation as the centre of mystical Britain.

"It was really quite funny," John recalled. "Every time I went up to Glastonbury Tor, I'd find people sitting there, reading my books!"

So how did he discover the secrets encoded in the dimensions of Glastonbury Abbey? Did he go there with a tape measure?

"No, there was no need. Other people were doing it already, such as Keith Critchlow and the RILKO ladies, Jeanette Jackson and Elizabeth Leader. The *Research Into Lost Knowledge Organisation*. They'd known Bligh Bond (see FT143:40-44 and pp50-54 of this issue). When I first started going to Glastonbury," he added, "there was very little for visitors to see apart from the Chalice Well, where a lady sold pots of jam."

But, I asked, how on Earth did he manage to find out about all this stuff that had been forgotten for so many years?

"I happened to come across an old book - *The Canon*. It's all in there. There's a copy somewhere," he added, looking to a row of bookshelves high up the wall. "Would you like to see it?" Producing an aluminium stepladder, John began painfully to climb it. "It's the first edition, with a buff spine. It should be around here..."

Having to watch a 76-year-old man swaying about on the top of a stepladder, liable at any moment to break his neck, was a profoundly disturbing experience.

"Oh bugger, I can't find it now!" he exclaimed, adding apologetically: "Every time I look up I feel dizzy."

I persuaded John to get off the ladder and let me try instead. Amongst the incredible collection of weird books, I eventually found it: *The Canon. An Exposition of the Pagan Mystery Perpetuated in the Cabala as the Rule of All the Arts*.

"First published anonymously in 1897," said John, "but I later discovered it was written by a William Stirling. All that's known about him is that he was a London Freemason who eventually killed himself in his rooms in the Adelphi."

The book is entirely unique, giving as it does a clear indication of just how much 'lost'

knowledge was preserved through Freemasonry. For Michell, it was the spark that ignited his passion for discovery.

He was right - it's all in there. Although there's no mention of Glastonbury, the book has a great deal to say about sacred geometry, the gematria, the Music of the Spheres and more.

"Stirling is terribly good on Plato too," said John. The philosopher has figured largely in Michell's work and although he always describes himself as a Platonist, I suggested that he is really a Pythagorean, to whom everything is number.

John shrugged: "Well Plato was also a Pythagorean, wasn't he? Pythagoras was such a myst-

erious figure, with his school of disciples sworn to secrecy. They were made to be vegetarian but not allowed to eat beans! But in Plato's writing you get a very strong sense of his character. A likable man, with a great sense of humour."

One of my favourite Michell books is *Euphonics*, a slim volume published by Wooden Books that introduces Plato's concept of 'the correctness of names'. Plato's Socratic dialogue is an exploration into the psychological effect of sounds and their role in the development of language. Michell's book is whimsical, arranged alphabetically with short verses to illustrate the implicit meaning of each letter,

such as the lazy L: '*Lingering by a limpid lagoon...*'

"I'm pleased you like that one," said John. "Euphonics is great fun, isn't it? Something that's been ignored by linguists, but it obviously was important."

We returned to the subject of 'number' - not the same thing as mathematics - which Pythagoreans believe is the very stuff of creation.

"Numbers are actually derived from number itself," declared John, helpfully. "There is a code of number - a universal code. But of course when I found it, Plato had already got there first. Numbers can be assigned to letters of the Greek alphabet, so Pythagoras's name is '864'. A name is also a symbol. Plato gives us strong clues - he'd obviously been initiated and knew the whole canon of number but was forbidden to reveal it all. So we just get hints."

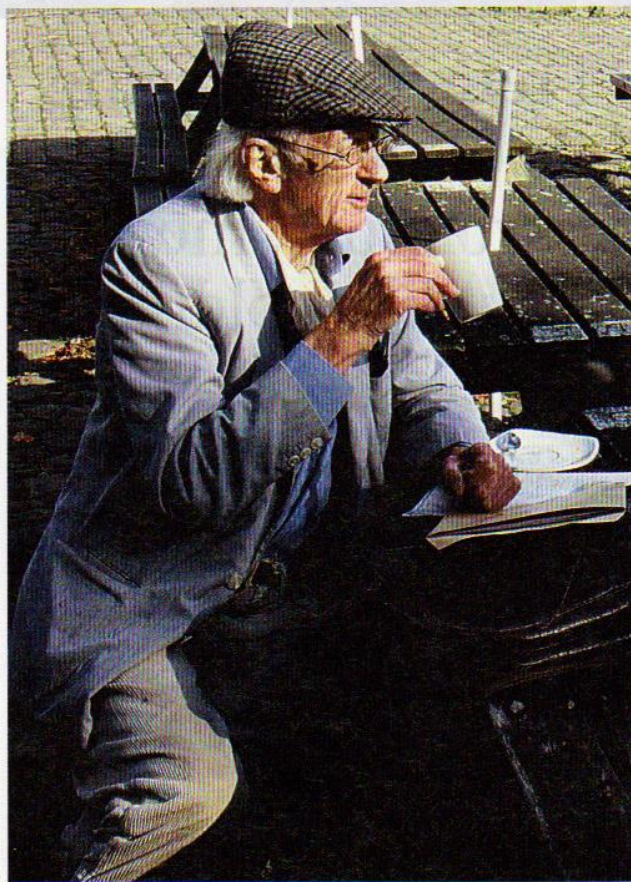
Michell's major passion though, is for the canon of measure. His latest book, a major work on Metrology, is complete but has yet to be published. The smaller *Ancient Metrology: The Dimensions of Stonehenge and of the Whole World as therein symbolised* came out in 1981, but only in a limited edition of 504 copies. There, condensed into less than 50 pages, are the gleanings of many years' research - the exact values of ancient measures used by the Romans, Greeks and Egyptians and how they relate to other measures and to the known proportions of the Earth. The Greeks and Romans, Michell claims, each used two different versions of their measures: one for northern latitudes and a slightly longer one that compensated for the Earth's bulge at the equator. But central to the whole canon, he claims, were the English foot and mile.

"Petrie measured the Parthenon in the 19th century" said John, "and recognised that the English foot was present. It's terribly important to preserve these ancient measures."

When European law threatened to replace feet and miles with a system based on the entirely invented metre, Michell began campaigning in *A Defence of Sacred Measures*.

"The metrication plan originally went way beyond replacing pounds and ounces, feet and miles," he recalled. "It was going to apply to geometry and time

"There is a code of number. But, of course, when I found it, Plato had already got there first"







JÜRGEN KRÖNIG

OPPOSITE AND ABOVE: John Michell photographed on a walk in 2008. BELOW: Two variations on the construction of the Heavenly City (New Jerusalem).

too, with a ridiculous notion to put 400 degrees in a circle and 10 months in a year!"

John had been answering my questions for an hour and a half with no signs of tiring, but had to break off to finish his column for the *Oldie* magazine. I sat reading while he squatted in front of a computer and silently tapped at the keyboard. I was surprised to see a computer at all, as he doesn't email – but he uses it just as a word processor. Half an hour later, he printed out the article, popped it in an envelope and headed off to the post office.

In his absence, fellow metrologist John Neal arrived: probably the only other person who truly understands Michell's research into number and measure. The two are old friends and have collaborated for many years, achieving the same results by different means: Neal is a number-cruncher, while Michell appears to employ something more like Alfred Watkins's visionary technique.

"It pisses me right off!" joked Neal. "We both took Metrology to a certain level, then I went off and lived in the States for five years. I spent the whole time tapping away on a calculator, working out new stuff. When I came back and saw John again, he'd got the same results! I said how did you do that then? His

method was completely wrong but he'd got the right answers... And he pointed out that some of my results were *wrong!*"

Michell returned and the two launched into a discussion about the value of  $\pi$  that I can't pretend to have understood at all; something to do with the Pythagorean quest to express  $\pi$  as a whole number.

They both apparently know how to do this, but despite their attempts to explain, I still don't.

Michell has always been a social animal with a large circle of friends and has been supported through his illness by a stream of well-wishers bearing soup and cakes. As the two Johns turned the conversation to the square root of two, we were mercifully joined by another of Michell's old friends, journalist Jürgen Krönig. Jürgen chatted on lighter topics, such as Darwin, politics and global cooling, while John pottered about joking and making more tea.

One of John Michell's many eccentricities had been his habit (only abandoned recently) of smoking hashish anywhere and everywhere. Strangely, no one has ever seemed to mind this, or even to particularly notice – with the possible exception of Boris Johnson at a *Spectator* lunch. Even Boris seemed to find it merely amusing! John chuckled as I recalled one of his rare TV

appearances: during a lull in the live coverage of a test match at Lords, the camera zoomed in to show ex-prime minister John Major in the crowd. Seated immediately behind him was John Michell, clearly rolling a joint...

I asked him about the relevance of what he once termed 'The Philosopher's Friend' to his work.

"Oh, *tremendously* important!" he replied. "It's been a great influence. Much more than the LSD we all took. I think it makes it easier for one to have new thoughts and make intuitive leaps. Odd connections..."

Daylight faded. Outside, the London traffic hummed. John returned to the sofa and lay back with closed eyes.

"You all carry on," he said. "I'm not really asleep – just bloody tired."

Because I don't really know John well enough, and because we're both rather English, I felt unable to ask him directly for his thoughts on dying. When I raised the subject of life after death, he deftly fielded it with scientific anecdotes about the work of Rupert Sheldrake and Monty Keen.

Did he, I asked, have a faith? "Not really," was the answer. "Although I do have a general interest in faith. I suppose you could say I'm a Platonist, if

anything."

John spoke admiringly of Patrick Harpur's work: "He's writing a book about the soul, you know. I think that's terribly brave of him."

I felt my dodging around the subject of death had led me nowhere.

What I'm really saying, John, is... do you believe in the soul?

He thought for a moment, then beamed: "Oh, yes!"

Before leaving, I asked John to sign my scruffy first edition of *The View Over Atlantis*. But this was to be no modern biro scribble – it was calligraphy. Producing a fountain pen, he began,

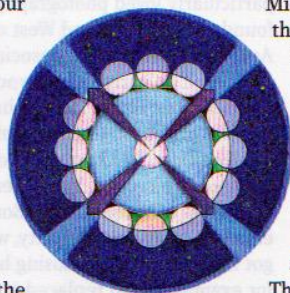
with a precise and unwavering hand, to slowly form the letters of his name on the title page. When the phone rang halfway through he carefully replaced the cap on his pen, only continuing when the call was over.

I said my goodbyes and ventured out into the rain of a London night.

After spending any time in John Michell's company, it's hard not to be drawn into his world of magical letters and numbers; a world of codes and hidden meaning. At the end of the street where John has lived for most of his life, there is a sign: 'Powis Square'.

What could be more fitting for a great shaman of number?

*Power is squared!* **T**



JOHN MICHELL

JOHN MICHELL