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Rat Scabies and Christopher Dawes

A punk rock legend and an ex-music journalist from Brentford – not your average Grail hunters, one might think. Nevertheless, Rat Scabies – former drummer for The Damned – and his neighbour Christopher Dawes travelled far from their native West London in search of buried treasure and secret wisdom. Recently, Rat took a break from touring, Chris interrupted working on his next book, and they hooked up with David Sutton to discuss their adventures, as described in Christopher's forthcoming book *Rat Scabies and the Holy Grail*. Photographs by Richard Bellia

Text: David Sutton / Images: Richard Bellia July 2005

How did you two meet, and what got you started on your quest?

Christopher Dawes: Well, I first met Rat because I moved in directly opposite him in Brentford. So the first thing I see when I open my curtains in the morning is his house – and, very often, him. And he has the same thing with me – we were brought together by chance. I was 15 when punk happened, and my favourite band was The Damned; it's probably what started me on a career as a music journalist. So it was a pretty weird coincidence to end up living opposite this guy who had been a big influence on me, although in all my years as a journalist I'd never actually met him.

Rat Scabies: I'd just quit the Damned and that whole show business thing and I really wanted to write something. I thought that the story of Father Bérenger Saunière is such a good one, with so many twists and turns to it, and I knew it so well that it seemed a good place to start. So I began writing a film script and trying it out on people. Having Chris, who's a writer, living opposite me meant he was one of my main targets! He'd never really heard the story before, but the more I told him about it, the more he got sucked into it.

You had something of a head start with this, given that your dad is president of the Saunière Society. Was that how you were drawn into the whole Rennes-le-Château mystery?

RS: My dad's a very learned bloke, and he doesn't do anything by halves; so when he takes on something like researching the Holy Grail, he does it properly. I had to put up with hearing about it from the very first broadcast of Chronicle with Henry Lincoln [the 1972 television programme which first introduced the Rennes mystery to a wider audience], so I was always familiar with the whole story. I was particularly taken with the story of Saunière the priest; I always thought he was really engaging – sort of like an ecclesiastical Flashman.

Chris, your experience was a bit different. In the book, you start off as Rat's long-suffering sidekick, always being dragged into his latest crazy scheme...

CD: I still am, I might add! I didn't have any serious interest in mysteries and strange phenomena. I'd read the odd thing – I'd buy Fortean Times from time to time – but I wasn't a serious student of any of this stuff.

I was, as you say, literally dragged into it. So, in the book, I'm very much this Everyman character – a normal bloke who doesn't have anything to do with the esoteric. It's that same inability to believe that's always stopped me being religious. It was only when we were at Rennes, and all these weird coincidences and things were happening, that I stopped and thought: "Hang on, I've really got to start believing something," if only to make some sort of sense of it.

RS: Yeah, it was the coincidences around the subject that did it for him. I'd told him that right at the offset – to be prepared for that sort of weirdness – but when it actually came down to the dead bees everywhere...

That's one of the themes of the book: the way things cluster together in apparently meaningful ways – like Chris's bees – and whether what



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Rat Scabies and Christopher Dawes

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WHEN YOU CLAIM

we're looking at its coincidence, synchronicity, paranoia or what Chris calls 'the red mini theory', where if you start looking for red minis you'll undoubtedly start seeing them everywhere... what do you feel about this now?

CD: At the end of the day, I came down to picking synchronicity. A year ago I'd have said it was coincidence... that's the journey the book follows, I suppose. Although I find myself asking, "what's doing the synchronising, then?" I still get the bee thing all the time – but that could be the red mini theory too I suppose.

RS: In a way it is where the book ends up... it's a question of faith and belief. The book's more about the journey than actually getting there.

The book paints quite an affectionate portrait of Henry Lincoln, gamely leading Saunière Society tours around Rennes, despite suffering from these terrible pains in his feet and so on. How much of an inspiration have Lincoln and his work been for you?

RS: Well, Henry's probably the last person on Earth who spoke to people who actually knew Saunière and Marie Denarnaud [Saunière's housekeeper] and he's done more research into this subject than anyone else on the planet. So, while I don't accept everything that Henry says, I do think he's the nearest thing to an eyewitness we've got. And also, he's not a bad old stick – we all love Henry.

It's hard to imagine Dan Brown having made his millions without the groundbreaking research done by Lincoln and published in The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail. You two – and many others – have obviously devoted a good many years to pondering the mysteries of Rennes and the Knights Templar; how did you feel about the massive success of The Da Vinci Code?

CD: Well, there's always that element of people thinking: "the wider community is playing with my toy." Anything that starts off as an underground thing, which only a small number of people are into, and then goes mainstream... well, that original group of people always feels a bit miffed. I've seen it in music many times.

RS: It's a bit strange really, because the whole Saunière crowd are probably the people who should resent Dan Brown the most, but they don't. In actual fact, they've responded very warmly – they like the fact that other people will now find out something about the subject. At the end of the day, if it means people rethink their belief patterns and so on, then it's a good thing. No institution survives unless it can stand up to scrutiny; so if people are looking at the Church and the Magdalene story with fresh eyes, that's a good thing. Hopefully it will bring new researchers and new viewpoints forward – that's what the Saunière Society tries to encourage.

CD: Yes, there's an advantage there too; we need new blood coming in. The first couple of meetings I went to with Rat, they were a bit, er, dusty; that's changed completely now, because a whole lot of new, sometimes younger, people have come in; and that's what will keep the story alive and take it to different places. I suppose that's what we've done really. Henry Lincoln must feel that his work has been ripped off, but it has reawakened interest and sent The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail back into the bestseller lists...

Why do you think The Da Vinci Code aroused such unexpected levels of interest?

RS: I have no idea. What makes a hit? It just seems to be a case of the time being right – and a lot of people can't be bothered to read HBHG or Picknett and Prince's The Templar Revelation... they're not really books that say "pick me up and take me to the beach" are they? But fortunately, there's enough in The Da Vinci Code to make people say: "Well, that was interesting; what else is out there?"

CD: I don't know either. Religion does seem to be back on the agenda lately, though, especially since 9/11. Look at the level of interest in the death of the Pope. Perhaps there's a greater interest in the mystery of religion rather than the Church as a social institution... an interest in religion in its broader sense, in belief itself I guess...

In the book, we see Rat gradually demolishing a copy of The Da Vinci Code – tearing up the cover for roaches, in fact...

RS: Well, I just put it in the perspective it deserved...

At least it provided some form of inspiration! Did you decide to do the book as a conscious response to Brown?

CD: No. Rat started talking to me about Rennes about five years ago, and as he kept telling me more and more about it I mentioned it to another friend of mine, who said: "You must start writing this down, because it's really funny." I made my first trip to Rennes before The Da Vinci Code came out. We were on the path already. But I was a bit worried that the success of The Da Vinci Code might mean that what we'd been doing would be pointless; but when I started reading it, I



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realised that it's a completely different thing. It's fiction for a start, and almost pulp fiction – whereas everything in our book actually happened.

Going back to some of the central mysteries explored in the book... what about the Priory of Sion? Is it really an ancient secret order connected to the Templars, or was it created by French prankster Pierre Plantard and his pals?

RS: I'm not sure what I'm allowed to say here. Personally, I'm very doubtful about the Priory of Sion's existence before Pierre Plantard. But there are many other people – like Clive Prince – who'll argue convincingly as to why it did exist. But I'm not sure that Plantard's version of the Priory can be taken as truth...

CD: ...and no one actually gave us a card that said "Bob Smith: Priory of Sion" on it. We never saw any physical evidence of the Priory of Sion. I don't think it exists in the way that most people would like it to exist... the part of me that doesn't want to believe in this sort of stuff says it's all nonsense. But that's the problem with secret societies isn't it?

I get the feeling that even if Plantard was simply a wind-up merchant, you still have a soft spot for him...

CD: I've got a big soft spot for Plantard. If the whole thing was a massive hoax, he did a fantastic job. Anybody who can pull off something like that – and start a whole industry around it – it's a fantastic achievement...

RS: But there are other things... Plantard's grandfather used to go to the village when Saunière was there. I suspect Plantard concocted the whole King of France bit to appease the natives while he was digging up their back gardens.

The thing is, whatever he did that was fraudulent, it does show an amazing historical imagination at work, as well as an amazing amount of research. It's impressive stuff – all that Poussin, and the codes and everything.

What I come back to though, is that there is a fundamentally true story in Berenger Saunière. You can't deny the mystery of Rennes-le-Château just because Plantard may have concocted some of the evidence. The 'no digging' sign was there long before Henry Lincoln arrived, and people were already aware of the priest and his millions.

In the book, we spend a lot of time with the various people who've been touched by the Rennes mystery, often to the point of obsession. You refer to them as 'Rennies', although the book paints an affectionate portrait of them. What do you think motivates these people to dedicate their lives to Rennes-le-Château?

RS: I think at the back of everyone's mind is gold: that's certainly what draws everyone to the story initially. It's about Saunière's millions: where did they come from? And this is where the Templars and the Priory tend to enter the story – as part of that question about the source of Saunière's wealth, of the corruption of this Catholic priest. And it leads on from there to a whole different set of values. People start examining the Templars, religious beliefs and history; you can see why people are drawn back, because every aspect of it is a mystery. It can be a physical thing you're looking for – the secret rooms and tunnels, which are still there today – but, on the other hand, you've got the New Age crowd who are like "I can feel the energy" and "the ley lines run right through the church." There's something for everyone: mediæval art, French history, religious symbolism, and even the Nazis thrown in for good measure! And you soon realise that it's not the Priory of Sion you should be scared of, it's the local nutcase who's digging up some spot where he thinks treasure is buried.

CD: For me, meeting these fantastic people was the best part of the whole experience. Even the people you wouldn't want to spend more than half an hour with were fantastic characters. The Rennes mystery attracts some great characters – and the book doesn't take the piss out of them, because we're on their side. The book tries to celebrate these people, who might look weird from some viewpoints, but are just human beings with an interest that's taken them down a certain path. Crazy ideas are to be encouraged – there's too many sensible people in the world.

I particularly enjoyed the bit about the 'Mole' of Rennes, digging his tunnels under the village.

RS: These people are amazing! A friend of mine in Rennes was telling me that when he goes to bed he can hear the generators going beneath the village. One day the whole fucking place is going to collapse... I imagine that by now the foundations of Rennes resemble a Crunchy.

What do you think about the people who claim to be modern day Templars – like those in Hertfordshire we reported on recently (FT193:28-30) Is there anything to link them with the original order or are they just people who like dressing up and waving swords around?

CD: The dressing up element certainly appeals to a lot of them. Going to a Templar initiation ceremony at Rosslyn is something I'll never forget – it was fantastic. There might have been a little bit of amateur dramatics going on there; but I can think of one or two people I met who were definitely a bit more serious about it. The clear continuation isn't there in the same way as with Freemasonry; the problem with the Templars is that big historical gap. I struggle to see a link between the Templars of the 12th and 13th centuries and today. But some of them have a genuine belief...

RS: Having said that, even the Templars themselves tend to dispute who exactly the 'real' ones are... although in a funny way I'm not sure how much it really matters. The Templars I know treat it very much as a religious – or at least a spiritual – order. So, again, it's matter of belief. And these people are very happy being Templars!

Surely one of the biggest problems in researching the Rennes mystery is dealing with the vast, and ever-growing, variety of theories surrounding it... as Chris says in the book, it's worse than trying to decide which energy supplier to go for... how did you decide which sources to trust and which to ignore?

CD: That's very difficult. As Rat said, we started with the fundamental human elements – Saunière, Maria, and their relationship – and the place itself. So we tried to focus on a historical mystery and a geographical one; but you never know quite where to pin the donkey's tail really, because the donkey is massive, and you've got a blindfold on. It probably comes down to where your own belief system leads you. At the end of the day, we'll probably never get to the bottom of it – until someone finds a stash of gold with Saunière's name on it... and actually, I don't think anyone really wants to know anyway. How boring would it be if there was no mystery?

It's a very funny book, full of comic incidents and crazy characters, but at times it feels as if something more serious is underlying the humour...

RS: Well, for a start, everything in the book is true...even the most ludicrous-sounding incidents. All I know is that when I go down to Rennes, I feel good. I love the history, I love the countryside, and I love being in the place where it actually happened. And for the people involved, the mystery brings them together; it gives them a reason to clip things from magazines, to swap old videos back and forth. And, it's a blast. You'd never have got me inside the Louvre, or St Sulpice or all those other French churches if I hadn't loved the story and the mystery of Saunière.

CD: If I had to say what the book is about in one word, I'd say: "belief". The Grail is the thing that everyone is searching for but no-one knows what it is. With us, maybe it's an age thing – we're both in our 40s, wondering what it's all about. Technology, communications and medicine are changing the world faster and faster by the day; I certainly need to step outside that and ask where my place is as a human being in all that...

I've got a little mystery of my own I'd like to clear up. My proof copy of the book runs out in mid-sentence on p318... so what happens at the end? Did you find the Holy Grail?

RS: Ha ha... that's for me to know! No, I don't think so. But I'll tell you this: when I was poking about in the basement of Rosslyn Chapel I found a metallic cup, hidden in a cupboard... which I put back in reverence, based on the theory that if I didn't recognise it as the Grail then I probably wasn't meant to have it...

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