

The Quality of Life

by David Hill

The Quality of Life

by David Hill

History and archaeology have been helped in many ways by the cliometricians, the adders up. They have brought much needed accuracy to their subjects, but in many cases at the cost of losing the human dimension; these Saxons were, after all, real people, our human ancestors. We must keep the idea that these are real people, and that, whilst dot distribution maps or counts of pottery sherds have their uses, we must attempt to see at times a whole rounded picture.

The Brutal Life

The whole of my work and academic career has been dominated by a search for the nature of Anglo-Saxon life, a sense of reality. It has been generally held by writers reviewing the Anglo-Saxon period that life was 'nasty, brutish and short'. For example D. M. Wilson in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England* (1976, 13-14) has in the introduction a segment headlined 'The Brutal Life' which opens:-

'It has often been emphasized that life in the Anglo-Saxon period was filled with danger, was nasty and full of trouble. Life was cheap, and illness, plague and famine were never far from the surface. The threat of violent death was very real.'

Wilson calls on *Life in Anglo-Saxon England* by R. I. Page (1970, 1-12) who has a chapter entitled 'The violent tenor of life' to bolster his argument. Page (1970, 78-97, 136-54) also provides a general view of the nature of the poverty of living conditions as shown in a series of examples. This theme can be traced at least as far back as R. H. Hodgkin, *A History of the Anglo-Saxons* (Hodgkin 1935, I, 221-3), but was reconsidered by Ralegh Radford (1957) and Rahtz (1976, 51-2, 79).

Subjective accounts such as these are to be approached with caution; for example Bronowski (1970, 260), in *The Ascent of Man*, discussed Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village* and came to different (and starker) conclusions than the poet, and it is likely in all periods that the commentator brings much of himself to the topic. I myself could tell my life story in a different way. I was bombed out twice as a child by the Luftwaffe; I served time on the frontier (two years in the British Army on the Rhine facing the Russians in Germany as a conscript); worst of all I had three years in a minor public school, so in some ways it depends on how one is telling the tale, and we are brought up against the old maxim *Who said it? Why did he say it? How did he know?*

Is there then a possibility of an objective assessment of the quality of Anglo-

Saxon life? What I could do is contrast the late Saxon era, of which I know most, with a well-documented century, the Victorian period. Now I do not wish to replace the current view of *The Brutal Life* with my own slant of some Anglo-Saxon *Merrie England*, but I do feel that we are lacking balance.

Variety and Range

One must not fall into the first trap of thinking that these nameless people were of some standard and similar mass, for these were all individuals known only to God ('The short and simple annals of the poor' as the poet Gray has it in his *Elegy*). For example, if we extract the labouring men shown in the depictions of the Labours of the Months in a Calendar (Fig. 1, pp 4-5), we find a range of individuals illustrated, and although one assumes these are not portraits, the artist of the exemplar realized that there was a range of men working in his idealized Anglo-Saxon settlement. We are shown bald men, bearded men, barefoot men, men with fair hair and with black. There is a clear point here, the fifty-four figures, while not portraits, show a range of men who are not kings or saints or bishops. Here therefore is a view drawn in the early eleventh century of how ordinary men appeared to the contemporary artist. One aspect of these illustrations is the range, and that range is to be seen likewise in the poem *The Gifts of Men*:-

One is poor, an unfortunate man;
Yet he is wise in arts of the mind ...
One can play the harp with his hands;
He has the cunning of quick movements on the instrument ...
One [is] skilled in songs ...
One is well versed in horses, learned in the arts of steeds ...
One is clever at chess (Old English *hrædtæfle*).
One is witty at the wine-drinking, a good lord of the beer ...
One is a fowler, skilled with the hawk ...
One is kind, has a heart and speech pleasant unto men.

(Gordon 1954, 316-17)

One aspect of the dress shown by the Calendars is that a number of the figures are shown without stockings or shoes. Now some of them were carrying out tasks, such as threshing, where bare feet were required, but obviously others are barefoot because of poverty. Can we make some headway with an insight into the range and variety of life, and move a little way away from the folk, the people, as mere statistics?

The Story of Cædmon from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 4, Chapter XXIV

Here in the story of Cædmon written in the first half of the eighth century, we have a rare anecdote of life within a settlement and some indication of the

variety of life and entertainment. With no mention of fighting to the death or of the blood feud, we seem to be hearing of a shepherd and his cowshed:-

For he [Cædmon] had lived in the secular habit until he was well advanced in years, and had never learnt anything of versifying; and for this reason sometimes at an entertainment, when it was resolved for the sake of merriment that all should sing in turn, if he saw the harp approaching him, he would rise from the feast and go out and return home.

When he did this on one occasion, and having left the house where the entertainment was, had gone to the stable of the cattle which had been committed to his charge that night, and there at the proper time had composed himself to rest, there appeared to him someone in his sleep, and greeting him and calling him by his name, he said: 'Cædmon, sing me something'. But he replied: 'I cannot sing; and for this reason I left the entertainment and came away here, because I could not sing'. Then he who was speaking to him replied: 'Nevertheless, you must sing to me'. 'What', he said, 'must I sing?' And the other said: 'Sing of the beginning of creation'. On receiving this answer, he at once began to sing in praise of God the Creator, verses which he had never heard ...

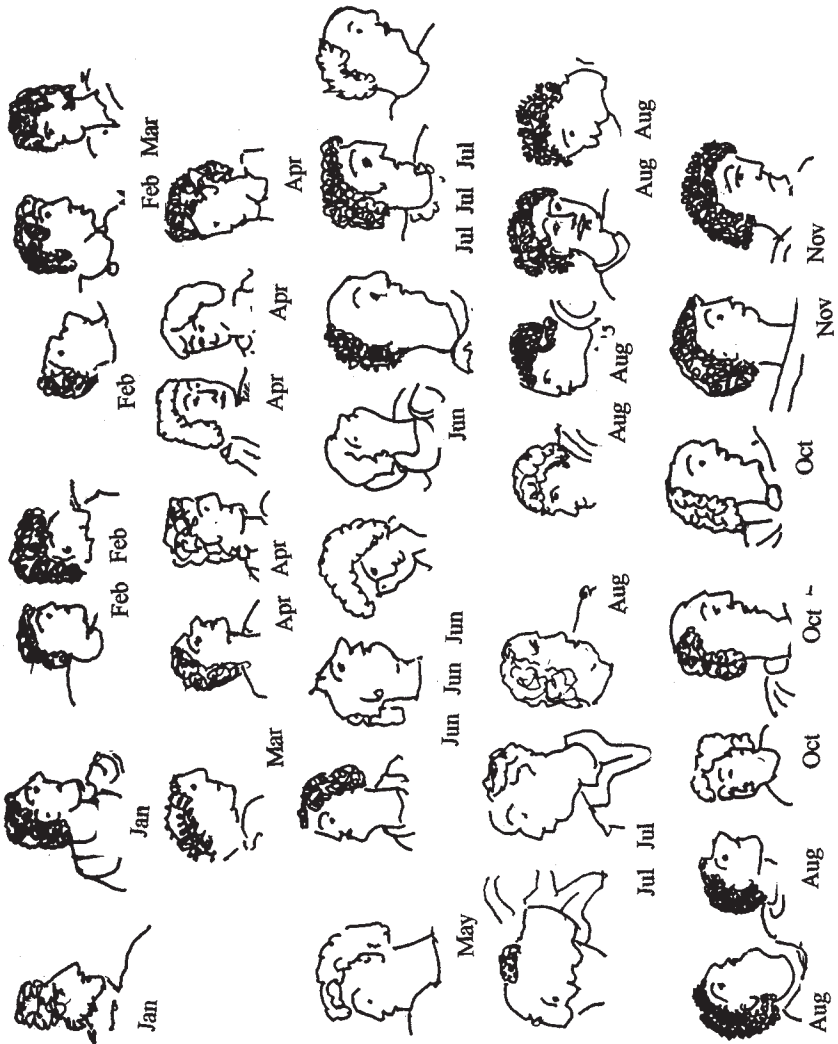
(Whitelock 1979, 722-3)

Note how in this simple tale of country folk that it is taken as fact that the villagers could all take part in song (although there is no mention of women), and in the phrase 'he saw the harp approaching' we seem to be offered a picture of communal conviviality where everyone has something to offer, even amongst the humblest. Although we have just mentioned the paucity of references to women in the literature, one of the rare exceptions is *The Wife's Complaint*:-

I have wrought these words together out of a wryed existence,
the heart's tally, telling off
the griefs I have undergone from girlhood upwards,
old and new, and now more than ever;
for I have never not had some new sorrow,
some fresh affliction to fight against.

(Alexander 1966, 81)

There are other hints of song; Cædmon's contribution was verse that was meant to be sung. Once again we are faced with questions to do with the culture; we can assume that there was some song and verse, but how much? The answer was probably that compared with our modern counterpart the amount was very considerable, for we are dealing with a non-literate society. Few of the laity could read but '*One is skilled in songs*' and this was held in the memory. We know that everyone knew the Lord's Prayer, the *nunc dimittis*, and probably much of the standard parts of the church services. Today the amount of verse in general knowledge is small, a scrap-book of nursery rhymes, the words of parts of some, but the villagers probably knew a wide repertoire of song and verse, not all of it religious. When I was a child people still whistled and sang in the streets, and when my Uncle Tom was a butcher's boy in the 1920s he always



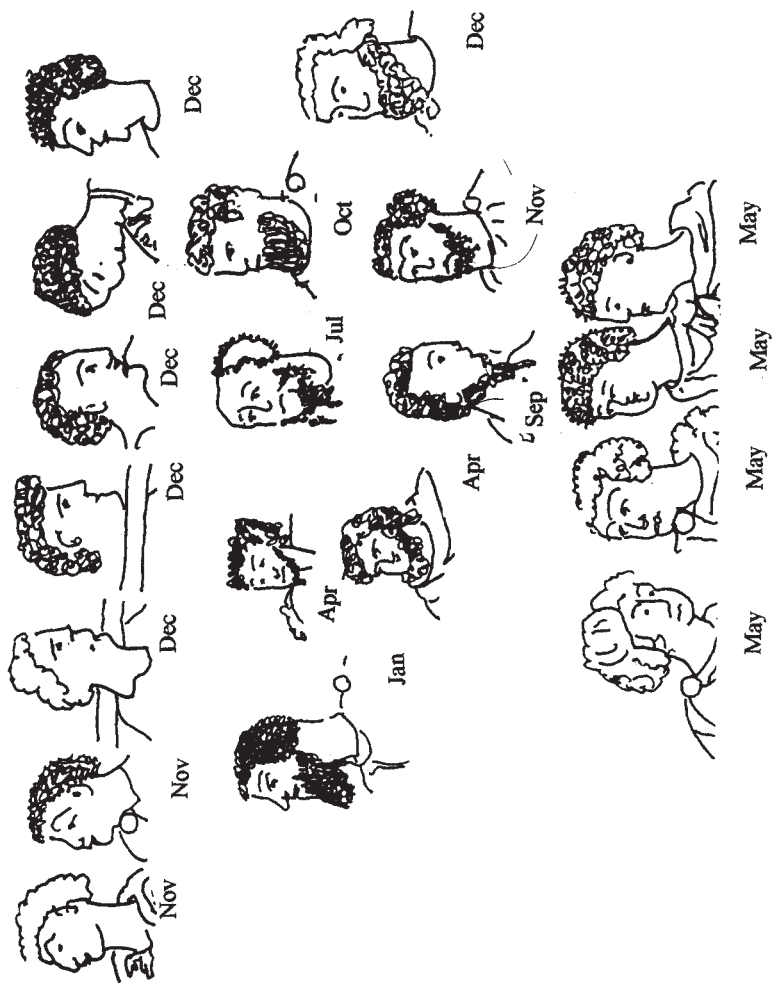


Figure 1. The range of people illustrated in the calendar in London, British Library, MS Cotton Julius A. vi, fols 3-8v. Drawing: David Hill

whistled as he went along. This tradition has died now that everyone has ear-pieces connecting them to ‘canned’ music.

We have already noted the importance of drink in *The Gifts of Men* above, and this is reinforced by Riddle 28 which also, with its detailed description of brewing, demonstrates an aspect of probably detailed folk knowledge of the craft. It is generally accepted that during the first centuries of its existence Beowulf was transmitted orally, the written version dating from around the year 1000 and now printed as over 3000 lines of text. When I was in the Army, protecting us from the Red Menace, I walked my sentry beat for two hours reciting verses without repeating myself; certainly my Uncle Tom could recite enormous slabs of verse, including *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, now a dying skill. The riddle, the answer to which is ‘ale’ tells us many things:-

Bip foldan dæl	fægre gegierwed
<i>Some acres of this middle-earth</i>	
mid þy heardestan	ond mid þy scearpestan
<i>are handsomely attired with the hardest, sharpest,</i>	
ond mid þy grymmestan	gumena gestreona,
<i>most bitter of man's fine belongings;</i>	
corfen, sworfen,	cyrred, þyrred,
<i>it is cut, threshed, couched, kilned,</i>	
bunden, wunden,	blæced, wæced,
<i>mashed, strained, sparged, yeasted,</i>	
frætwed, geatwed,	feorran læded
<i>covered, racked, and carried far</i>	
to durum dryhta.	Dream bið in innan
<i>to the doors of men. A quickening delight</i>	
cwicra wihta,	clengeð, lengeð,
<i>lies in this treasure, lingers and lasts</i>	
para þe ær lifgende	longe hwile
<i>for men who, from experience, indulge</i>	
wilna bruceð	ond no wið spriceð,
<i>their inclinations and don't rail against them;</i>	
ond þonne æfter deape	deman onginneð,
<i>and then, after death, it begins to gab,</i>	
meldan mislice.	Micel is to hycganne
<i>to gossip recklessly. Shrewd men</i>	
wisfæstum menn,	hwæt seo wiht sy.
<i>must think carefully what this creature is.</i>	

(Text: Krapp and Dobbie 1936, 194-5; translation: Crossley-Holland 1979, 49)

The process of brewing beer from barley (the Old English name is literally ‘beer-grass’) is told in considerable detail and shows the aspects of the craft in eleven stages.

Cut	the fields are harvested and the barley placed in ricks
Threshed	with flails, the barley is removed from the ear
Couched	spread on a floor to germinate
Kilned	the grain is then heated to stop the germination
Mashed	with clean water
Strained	
Sparged	sprinkled with hot water
Yeasted	yeast is added
Covered	the mash is covered and allowed to stand
Racked	drawn off from the lees, clarified
Carried far	

Barley does not contain sugar. It is full of starch, which is not suitable for brewing because alcohol is made by fermenting sugar; therefore the process first has to germinate the barley, and as the barley germinates, sugar is formed in the seed. This is then heated to stop the germination. The mash now contains malt, which is a form of sugar, yeast is added, fermentation of the malt then takes place, and beer is racked off. A second addition of hot water to the mash produces a weak drink, ‘small beer’.

Craft and Crafty

A particular line of modern humour has depicted aspects of the past as primitive and its people as stupid. However, we must take on board the knowledge that these were crafty people, in that they were capable of handicrafts; were ‘uneducated’ and yet capable of all sorts of crafty work, which one assumes were mainly learnt by ‘standing next to Nelly’.

The abilities of the Saxons are varied, and much of it would seem to have been carried out without measurements and by eye. It might be too much to claim that it was all done with primitive tools when we know of specialized tools for boring, for example, the nave of a spoked wheel. The illustration of a winepress from a manuscript of the first half of the eleventh century shows the family of Noah picking grapes (Fig. 2). The illustration is fairly rudimentary, but we know that the practice of treading grapes by foot was seen as unpleasant. The main feature of the winepress is seen to be the screw which dominates the machine. There are still, in the museums of the south-west of England, many examples of cider presses, which are similar machines and were certainly both manufactured and in use locally until the last century.

A reconstruction of our Saxon winepress can easily be made (Figs. 3 and 4); I offer it as an example of the complexity which could have been achieved.

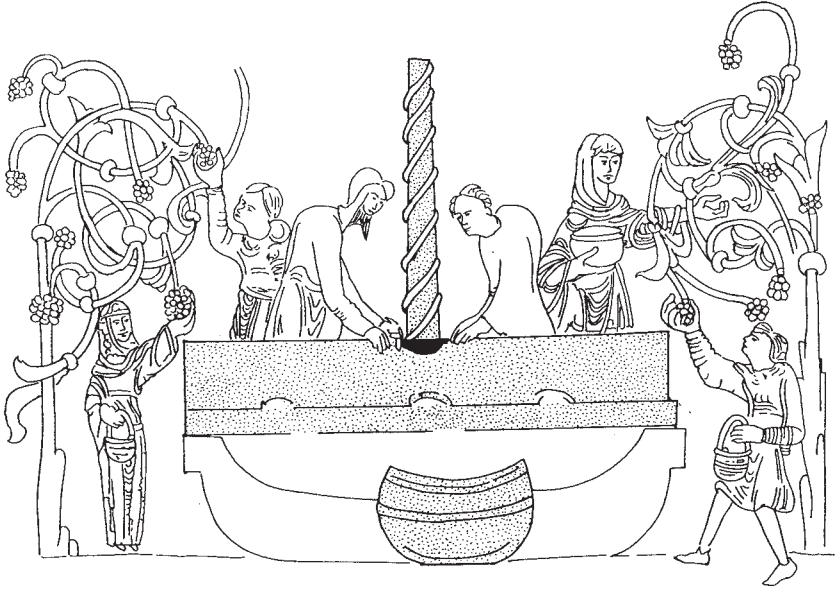


Figure 2. Noah and his family making wine (reconstructed from the Old English illustrated *Hexateuch*, London, British Library MS Cotton Claudius B. iv., fol 17r).
Drawing: David Hill

Fun

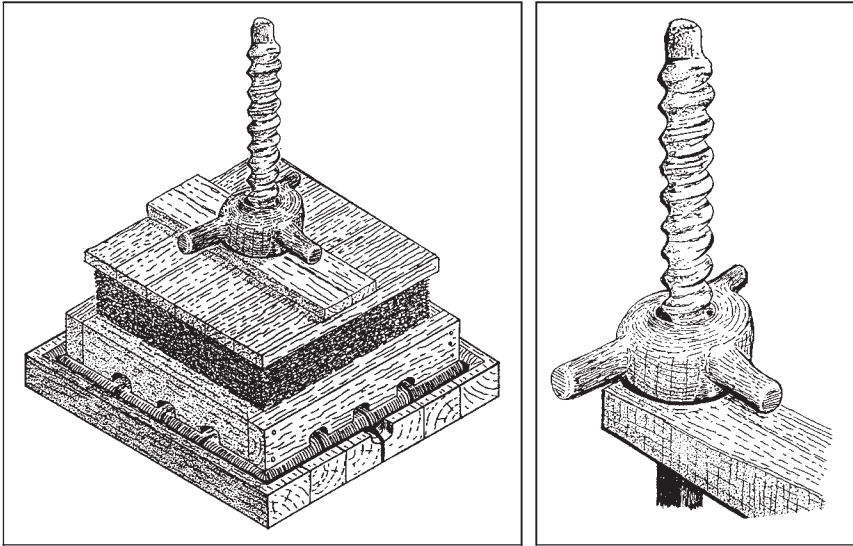
To return to the *The Gifts of Men*:

One can play the harp with his hands;
He has the cunning of quick movements on the instrument ...
One is skilled in songs ...
One is clever at chess (Old English *hrædtæfle*).

All Sorts of Pastimes

Clearly, as with the story of Cædmon, the playing of a harp and the singing of songs are skills which need an audience, the entertainment of the folk. The idea of board games is something different, only two people need be concerned. Payne (2006) discusses the subject in some detail and comes to complex conclusions, the best description being illustrated by a tenth-century gaming-board (Fig. 5).

So we have already a range of pastimes, some indication of the general tenor



Figures 3 and 4. *The winepress reconstructed. The screw is from Corinth. Drawings: David Hill*

of life; when we were young we were used to people whistling in the streets, so was there a similar amount of music in the settlement? Before we consider this we should perhaps consider one of our sources. Although the Riddles form a group of light-hearted sources we should spend a moment or two thinking about the *tone* of a group of sources which often allow us glimpses of life when they are dealing with weightier issues. The saints' lives tend to be about a humourless and very often vindictive group of people, for example there is the plasterer called Earnmær, who features in the *Life of St Wulfstan*, bishop of Worcester (1062-95). Earnmær listened to Wulfstan's own sermons, but often walked out during sermons by Coleman (Wulfstan's hagiographer); as a result he fell soon afterwards from scaffolding, severely injuring both legs (Winterbottom and Thomson 2002, 92-5).

Perhaps the commonest pastime of which we know is hunting in all its varied forms. As a child and young man in West Somerset we fished in the sea and also on the beach, while stags and hinds were hunted, as were hares and foxes, and there were some particularly cruel forms of hunting in badger baiting and otter hounds. From an early age bird scaring yielded a small harvest of birds, and more prevalent was the night-time netting of nesting birds in the hedgerows (*Four and twenty blackbirds* still survives as a nursery rhyme), and the rivers yielded their own harvest. At the lower end of society of course all this provided, particularly in winter, a source of food; as a child I once had 'badger ham'.

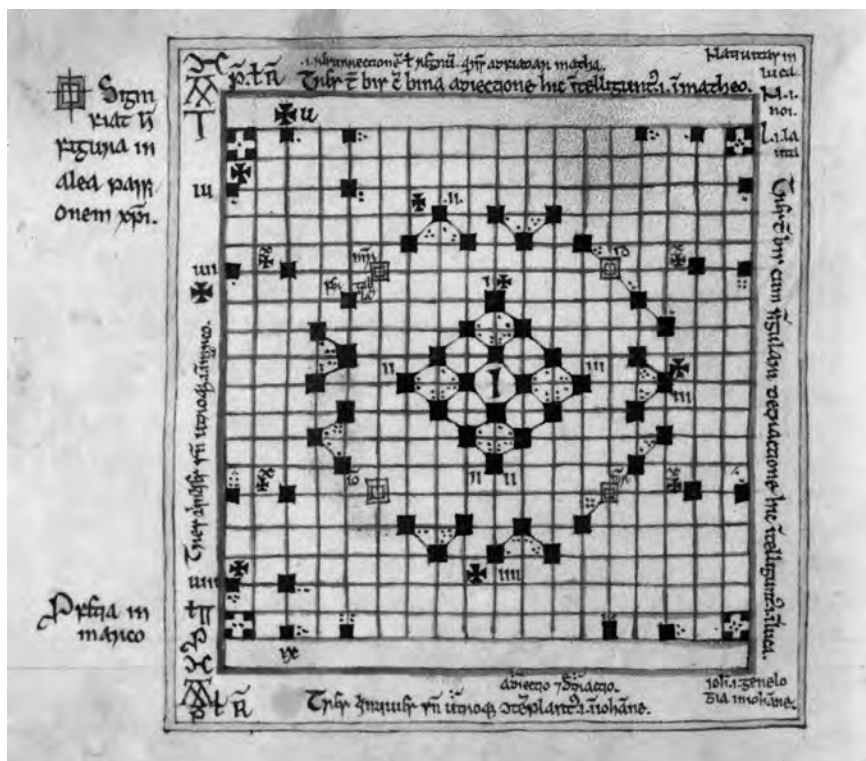


Figure 5. Twelfth-century Irish copy of a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon *alea evangelii* board (Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 122, fol 5v, detail). Photograph: by permission of the President and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

Note: a colour illustration of this page may be seen online at <http://image.ox.ac.uk/show?collection=corpus&manuscript=ms122>.

Humour: The Riddles

Ungloomy Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Poetry (Young 1950) is an article, to my knowledge standing alone, that deals with the lighter side of the genre of Anglo-Saxon poetry. There are few examples from the period of visual humour, as obviously they would be graffiti and thus ephemeral, but a bored scribe turned a worm hole (made by a book-worm in the vellum he was working on) into a little bear (Fig. 6) in a tenth-century manuscript (British Library, MS. Add. 47967. 62v).

Max Miller and a long tradition of English comics have mined a deep vein of humour which deals with *double entendre*, where the audience are led along



Figure 6. *A little bear drawn round a worm hole in the Tollemache Orosius (London, British Library, Additional MS 47967, fol 62v). Drawing: David Hill*

suggestive paths only to be offered an innocent solution at the conclusion. This tradition runs back to our period. It is surprising that the ribald verses appear in monastic books, as one then assumes a monkish audience. An example is Riddle 45:-

Ic on wincle gefrægn weaxan nathwæt,
I'm told a certain object grows
þindan ond þunian, þecene hebban;
in the corner, rises and expands, throws up
on þæt banlease bryd grapode,
a crust. A proud wife carried off
hygewlanc hondum, hrægle þeahte
that boneless wonder, the daughter of a king
þrindende þing þeodnes dohtor.
covered that swollen thing with a cloth.

(Text: Krapp and Dobbie 1936, 205; translation: Crossley-Holland 1979, 67)

The answer, at least according to the editors, is 'dough' (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, 346-7), and there are many other examples of this type of humour in the riddles. So what was there in the way of fun?

Scientific

We should perhaps agree with the ancient Greeks that 'no man is a philosopher with toothache', or to put it another way, if a man is in good health his view of the world is cheerful. In other words, a man in good health with a full stomach will have a more optimistic outlook.

There are several non-literary pointers to life in the period. I was privileged to know Don Brothwell at Winchester, who showed the importance of the skeletal material, and over the years not only has the volume of material increased, but

the range of approaches has also widened. One of the set of statistics we now have is the London Body Heights Table (Werner 1998, 108):-

<u>Period</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>
	Centimetres	Centimetres
Prehistory	170	158
Roman	169	158
Saxon	173 (5 feet 8 inches)	163 (5 feet 4¼ inches)
Medieval	172	160
Tudor & Stuart	172	158
Georgian	171	157
Victorian	166	156
1998	175 (5 feet 9 inches)	162 (5 feet 3¾ inches)

The most noticeable feature of these figures is that the Saxons show better than all other periods up to the very recent modern age, with the Victorians showing particularly poorly. In the many skeletons recovered the state of the teeth is also fine, telling the same story of good diet and (during life) general good health. We can therefore assume that the Saxons were comparatively fit and well-set-up people. What does not show in these figures is the constant loss of babies and infants in the early years of life. Sorrows there were in full measure, and stoically borne, as is illustrated in the gnomic poem *Maxims I*:-

The Lord increases children, whom early illness takes; thus there come to be on earth so many of the race of men; there would not be a limit of progeny on earth if He who created this world did not decrease them.

(Gordon 1954, 309-10)

Endpiece

So clear your mind of the prejudices for the heroic and bloody age and let us end on a different note. We are conditioned to a view of the Middle Ages by the *Canterbury Tales*, the pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, telling tales and singing songs. In the earliest *Life of St Dunstan* we are told, entirely by the way, how while at the 'royal island' (?Glastonbury), Dunstan became unpopular with his companions and younger kinsmen; his fondness for old songs and his mechanical skill were twisted into a charge of the black arts. Slander prevailed and he was sent on his way. Then, having been driven out, he was attacked on the road by his persecutors who threw him into a muddy ditch (Stubbs 1874, 11-13). The story was told as an uplifting tale, but for us it tells us, entirely by the way, of folk song and story telling. These 'old songs', as in stories of Charlemagne, must surely mean in the vernacular, such as those which Caedmon was avoiding when he went outside to escape his turn at singing. The story was told as an uplifting tale, but for us it tells us, entirely by the way, of folk song and story telling. Another aspect of a bucolic and peaceful time is in Riddle 8 (possibly the answer is a starling):-

Ic þurh muþ sprece	mongum reordum,
wrencum singe,	wrixle geneahhe
heafodwope,	hlude cirme,
healde mine wisan,	hleopre ne miþe,
eald æfensceop,	eorlum bringe
blisse in burgum,	þonne ic bugendre
stefne styrme;	stille on wicum
sittað nigende.	Saga hwæt ic hatte,
þe swa scirenige	sceawendwisan
hlude onhyrge,	hæleþum bodige
wilcumena fela	wope minre.

(Krapp and Dobbie 1936, 185)

I've one mouth but many voices;
I dissemble and often change my tune;
I declaim my deathless melodies,
I don't desist from my refrain.
Aged evening-songster, I entertain
men in their homes by rehearsing
my whole repertoire; they sit, bowed down,
quiet in their houses. Guess my name,
I who mimic the jester's japes
as loudly as I can, and rejoice men
with choicest songs in various voices.

(Crossley-Holland 1979, 30)

So here we have a people highly skilled, with a culture that deeply penetrated the whole of society; where nature, particularly songbirds, were prized; poetry and song were appreciated and widely disseminated; where there was a genuine folk culture. The bulk of our people were healthier, at least in comparison with other ages, and one must assume better fed. They had many skills and could use them; they were remarkably self-sufficient, able to defend themselves and to take part in battle, albeit in the lower ranks, as archers, spear holders, stone throwers and bringing up supplies. Many settlements went for decades without raiders or warfare, the reign of Edgar the Peaceable being one of these times of comparative tranquility. One general but all-pervasive dimension we should not forget is that of faith and religion, and this is to be found in the vast majority of the surviving literature. Finally we have little, apart from the story of Cædmon, that tells us of another all-pervading dimension which is the sense of community, the sense of belonging. Today we lack this dimension in the life

of many, like the old lady in the high rise flat in north Manchester, who gets an ersatz community from television soaps as she lives in isolation with her budgie.

There are other aspects to the period apart from **the brutal life**.

Bibliography

- Alexander, M., 1966. *The earliest English poems* (Harmondsworth)
Bronowski, J., 1973. *The Ascent of Man* (London)
Crossley-Holland, K. (trans.), 1979. *The Exeter Book riddles* (Harmondsworth)
Gordon, R. K. (trans.), 1954. *Anglo-Saxon poetry*, revised ed. (London)
Hodgkin, R. H., 1935. *A history of the Anglo-Saxons*, 2 vols. (Oxford)
Krapp, G. P. and Dobbie, E. V. K. (ed.), 1936. *The Exeter Book*, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3 (New York)
Page, R. I., 1970. *Life in Anglo-Saxon England* (London)
Payne, I., 2006. 'Did the Anglo-Saxons play Games of Chance? Some Thoughts on Old English Board Games', *Antiquaries Journal* 86, 330-45
Radford, C. A. R., 1957. 'The Saxon house: a review and some parallels', *Medieval Archaeology* 1, 27-38
Rahtz, P., 1976. 'Buildings and rural settlement', in Wilson 1976, 49-98
Stubbs, W. (ed.), 1874. *Memorials of Saint Dunstan* (Rolls Series, London)
Werner, A., 1998. *London Bodies: the changing shape of Londoners from prehistoric times to the present day* (London)
Whitelock, D. (ed.), 1979. *English Historical Documents*, I: c.500-1042, 2nd ed. (London, 1979)
Wilson, D. M. (ed.), 1976. *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge)
Winterbottom, M., and Thomson, R. M. (ed. and trans.), 2002. *William of Malmesbury, Saints' Lives* (Oxford)
Young, J. I., 1950. 'Glæd wæs ic gliwum: Ungloomy Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Poetry', *The early cultures of north-west Europe (H. M. Chadwick memorial studies)*, ed. C. Fox and B. Dickins (Cambridge), 275-87

The Quality of Life

by
DAVID HILL

Deerhurst Lecture 2005

ISBN10 0 9549484 2 4
ISBN13 978 0 9549484 2 9

© David Hill and the Friends of Deerhurst Church, 2010

ISBN10 0 9549484 2 4

ISBN13 978 0 9549484 2 9

Published by The Friends of Deerhurst Church

The Friends of Deerhurst Church
Select List of Publications in print (May 2010)

<i>How do we know so much about Anglo-Saxon Deerhurst?</i> By Patrick Wormald (Deerhurst Lecture 1991) ISBN 0 9521199 0 0	£3.00
<i>The origins of the parishes of the Deerhurst area</i> By Steven Bassett (Deerhurst Lecture 1997) ISBN 0 9521199 3 5	£2.50
<i>From Anglo-Saxon to Anglo-Norman: North Gloucestershire in Domesday Book</i> By John Moore (Deerhurst Lecture 1998) ISBN 0 9521199 4 3	£3.00
<i>Odda, Orm and others: Patrons and Inscriptions in Later Anglo-Saxon England</i> by John Higgitt (Deerhurst Lecture 1999) ISBN 0 9521199 7 8	£3.50
<i>Deerhurst above and below ground</i> By Philip Rahtz (Deerhurst Lecture 2000) ISBN 0 9521199 5 1	£2.50
<i>Anglo-Saxon Sculptures at Deerhurst</i> By Richard N Bailey (Deerhurst Lecture 2002) ISBN 0 9521199 9 4	£3.00
<i>Deerhurst and Rome: Æthelric's Pilgrimage c.804 and the Oratory of St Mary Mediana</i> By Richard Gem (Deerhurst Lecture 2007) ISBN 0 9549484 0 8	£3.00
<i>The Priory Church of St. Mary at Deerhurst</i> By Arnold Porter (Guidebook, lavishly illustrated) ISBN 1 872665 39 X	£2.50
<i>The discovery of an Anglo-Saxon painted figure at St Mary's Church, Deerhurst, Gloucestershire</i> by Steve Bagshaw, Richard Bryant and Michael Hare (Reprinted by permission from <i>The Antiquaries Journal</i> Volume 86, 2006)	£4.00
<i>The Ninth-century Polychrome Decoration at St Mary's Church, Deerhurst, Gloucestershire</i> by Richard Gem and Emily Howe, with Richard Bryant (Reprinted by permission from <i>The Antiquaries Journal</i> Volume 88, 2008)	£6.00
<i>The 9th-century West Porch of St Mary's Church, Deerhurst, Gloucestershire: Form and Function</i> by Michael Hare (Reprinted by permission from <i>Medieval Archaeology</i> Vol 53, 2009)	£4.00
<i>Conquest and Controversy: The Early Career of Odda of Deerhurst</i> By Timothy Bolton (Deerhurst Lecture 2006) ISBN 0 9549484 1 6	£3.00
<i>The Quality of Life</i> By David Hill (Deerhurst Lecture 2005) ISBN 0 9549484 2 4	£3.00

Publications may be obtained from:-

The Publications Secretary, The Friends of Deerhurst Church, Duckpool Cottage,
Deerhurst Walton, Gloucestershire, GL19 4BS

Please add 40p for each publication for postage and packing.

A full list of publications and current prices is available on the Friends' website at:
www.deerhurstfriends.co.uk