The Staffordshire Hoard

Story Hoard
Story Hoard
Story Hoard
Story Hoard

Foreword 9

Poems 15

The Hoard  Evan Wang 17
Anglo-Saxon Stanzas  Lorraine Boyce 19
Untitled  Lisa Grace 22
Untitled  Arina Cvetkova 24
Standing in the Heart, Come and See Me
Connor Robinson 25
My Monster  Lorraine Boyce 26
Hilda  Geoffrey Skidmore 28
The Interesting Hoard  Yuwen Ni 30
Who Had Me Made?  Lynda Lea 31
Morgane  Gaynor Macdonald 34
The Past Day  Samson Mehabton 35
The Hoard  Rahel Mehabtom 36
That Passed Over, This Can Too
Heather J Anderson 37
Hoard Image  Yuting Ni 38
The Hoard  Omer Omer 39
A Time of Fear  Lavinia Bousfield 41
Regon’s Prayer  Doreen Goodall 42
For You Hassan Jan, on your Birthday
Fatemeh Rabiee 44
Story Hoard

Riddles

A Riddle  Adam Staples  47
Riddles One & Two  Christina Liao  48
Foe or Friend? & The Marker Lorraine Boyce  49
A Riddle  Geoffrey Skidmore  51
Riddles One & Two  Gaynor Macdonald  52
Riddles One, Two & Three  Heather J Anderson  53
Riddle  Ann Cullen  55
Worn with Pride  Lavinia Bousfield  56
My Story & The Lure of That Which Captivates  Connor Robinson  58
Riddle  Bob Burton  60

Stories

A True Ghost Story  Bob Burton  63
The Dark before Dawn  Emma Whitney  64
A Period of Time in King Offa’s Reign  Ann Cullen  67
The Loaf  Lorraine Boyce  73
The Death of King Penda  Lisa Grace  76
Story Hoard

The Pilgrim and the Shepherd
Doreen Goodall 78

Two Brave Warriors  Lavinia Bousfield 89

Changing Times in Mercia  Ann Cullen 95

A Dream  Heather J Anderson 101

After the Monster  Alan Hill 107

Freedom Lost  Gaynor Macdonald 110

Erick Goody and the Buried Treasure
Geoffrey Skidmore 125

Contributors 133

Acknowledgements 145
Story Hoard
Foreword
Welcome to Story Hoard.

I’m delighted to share with you these outstanding poems, riddles and stories, which were created during workshops held through winter 2013 and spring 2014 with various writing groups in Birmingham.

Much is known factually about the Staffordshire Hoard but here you will find imaginative, poetic and fictional responses to the Hoard and the Anglo-Saxon period. What you read here is inspired as much by what is unknown, as by what is known.

To create this work, sessions were held with the talented writers from the Kings Norton Writers’ Group, with members of the public at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery and with ESOL students from Birmingham Metropolitan College. As metal detectorists had played such a crucial role in the story of the Staffordshire Hoard, we were also keen to work with local metal detecting groups. Several members of these groups attended the writing workshops and, alongside their creative work, provided valuable insights, anecdotes and historical information.
Most of the pieces you will read here were inspired by workshop exercises, which imagined Anglo-Saxon characters and emotions, and the freedoms and constraints of life in that mysterious period of history. We considered how far human nature changes and how far it stays the same. What is the impact of war, love, death, even weather, on our lives, now and then?

In one session we looked at the ancient poem *Deor* and wrote our own responses using the poem’s refrain, ‘that passed over, this can too.’ In another session we explored the long tradition of Anglo-Saxon riddles, and then created our own teasing poetic puzzles. We also thought about monsters, what fears and threats they represent. We read the epic Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, and created our own monsters in response. Finally, we looked at individual objects from the Hoard and imagined what that object might say, and what urgent story it might tell, if it had a voice.

The possibilities for approaching the Hoard creatively were limitless, and what you read here is only a selection of work produced in the many Story Hoard workshops. In the course of our imaginings I learnt much, not just about
the Hoard, though we had plenty of generous experts in our sessions, but also about metal detecting, ancient Mercia, Anglo-Saxon battles and kings and, above all, the timeless challenges of human experience.

I hope that you will enjoy reading these stories, poems and riddles as much as the participants enjoyed creating and crafting them, and I enjoyed sparking, reading and editing them.

You may never think about the Staffordshire Hoard in the same way again.

Helen Cross
Writer
June 2014
Story Hoard
Poems
The Hoard

The sword
Goes through the body
Just like thunder

The cheek piece
Has gone through many wars
Like an old soldier
Never giving up
Although it’s been broken

The knife
Stands for patience
Like a snake

Wait
Till the enemy is tired
Then give him the critical strike.

By Evan Wang
Story Hoard
Anglo-Saxon Stanzas

Edith the Wife
Alone in the Mead Hall, kneading my loaf,
Soft dough yielding under my hands.
Grains of flour, floating in sunshaft
Milled from the ryegrain by the rough quern.
Punch of life within me, building a thundercloud,
As summer storm near ruined our harvest.
That passed over, this can too.

Hilda the Sister
Seeking my strong sister, gone from her hut
Not wrestling roots from sun-warmed soil.
Why don’t I hear her laughing in woodland?
Where as a crawl-child I cried, lost in ferns.
That passed over, this can too.

Eboric the Husband
Wild wife leads me upward, treading the mountain,
Crushing thyme-scent under swift feet
Mouths stained with bilberry, blue-bruised with kissing.
Rowan leaves over as we made new life.
Down in the village her rivals all weeping.
Sad to have lost me, their hopes of me dashed.
That passed over this can too.
Edith
My Lord strides away from me, first of his kinsman,
Driving off Northmen, grim with ill will.
Lightning of swordplay, thudding of bodies,
At last he returns to me, storm blown and proud.
Are they the same hands, scarred, drenched with lifeblood?
Has his love withered, as blossom in frost?
Can he caress me; am I yet his bright jewel?

That passed over, this can too.

Hilda
I was a green shoot, growing in rich soil,
Nurtured and nourished, never hard pressed.
Then my fate showed itself, reflection in water,
Salt tears of my sister at losing her mate.
Shall I shun love then, cold, sharp as the hailstone?
Standing alone and avoiding all men?
Smelling sweet heather, no muck sweat nor mead breath.

That passed over this can too.

Aelfweald the Baby
Curled in dark safety, throbbing with heartbeat,
Soon I’ll push screaming out of my cave,
Story Hoard

Smell of our shared blood, binding me to her,
My mother’s eyes sparkling as dewdrops in sun.
Years of sweet caring, dripped milk and honey,
Loving her warm arms, her smell of fresh bread.
Will she keep strong, I’ll grow up and away?
When I keep gold rings, to toss to brave thanes.
Sword of my father a weight in my hand.
Birth passed over, life will too.

By Lorraine Boyce
Coppery tints shine in sun’s midst
Catching my image, powerful and true
Of warrior, spear, helmet and shield
And the golden hide of the king’s loyal steed
His ravens call out to him, leading him on
A king war-ready but the day not yet won.

My highlights shimmer, my shadows deepen
When tilted in the morning’s sun
I stand emblazoned on shields of glory
Fixed in battle with sword in hand
Standard aloft and spear at the ready
Poised for war, gilded horse beneath me.

My metal taken from beneath the earth
Beaten and crafted ‘till beauty’s emerged
I weave my story in a skin of gold sheet
Whilst kingship wavers in battle’s heat
Long lines of warrior kin
Wiped out in man’s great sin
Story Hoard

Displayed and captured in horror and violence
The beauty and art of my Saxon craft
Forged into me in gold upon shield
Buried to be found in a farmer’s field
Behold! I am treasure
And I last forever

By Lisa Grace
Story Hoard

Untitled

The hoard is a very elderly man
He looks muscular, but hungry
He lost too much energy working many years ago.

He wore amazing decorations
On his knife, helmet and breast plate
Metal is very difficult to work
But for him it was routine

When I learnt this it was amazing news.

By Arina Cvetkova
Standing in the Heart, Come and See Me

Wasn’t it forgotten
That what-lay beneath the ground
Stolen-misplaced in a time long gone
Treasure exists does it not?
What lies here, treasure? A hoard?
It is set to change our understanding
My design is that of a lost culture
Yet it provided the foundation stones of our own
Piece by piece, every object may hold a key
A key to the development of history
The development of an English civilisation
A light is now present on our forefathers
The creators of the Anglo Kingdoms
Now I stand as testament to the creativeness of barbarians
The secrets of their society have moved into the light.
Standing now, here in the heart of a United Kingdom
The world and its people may come and witness my beauty.

By Connor Robinson
My Monster

Eclipse brings the darkness; the sun hides its face from us.
Cold bites, we shudder beneath a green sky.
Winds come that circle, rise, and tear up sweet flowers.
We smell geyser’s sulphur, rushing ripped from the rock.

Then a greeny grey mountain looms out of steam spurts.
It’s shining, metallic, thick headed, foul mouthed,
Lurching much closer it marks out our time.
Chatter of scales’ clash, booming of whale song,
Screams of its victims pierce now our ears.
Then it moves past us with tail trail behind,
All slime and rank droppings
Left in the clawed clay.

Under the high cliff it lived in its seacave,
Rough rocks around and, below, the boiled sea.
Why did it come, when will it come back?

By Lorraine Boyce
Story Hoard
Hilda

She slithered into the world. Field-born between turnips and onions. Not wanted — another mouth to feed — boys more useful, worked harder. Mother’s dugs empty: the unwanted girl, passed round the village women, From breast to breast, to suck what remained after other babies have fed. Some days a feast, more often, famine. That passed over, this can too.

Struggled to grow, survived the harvest of infants. Siblings and playmates died - mother too succumbed. Older now, her mother’s place she takes. The hard work never ends. A beating received if no food prepared, fills her father’s belly and later his bed. That passed over, this can too.

Blossomed - full bodied, now noticed by men, Passes from father to husband, no change there. Beatings more frequent, worked both farm and house, Husband as much work as the babies she bore. Five healthy children when the reaper did call. He passed through the village and his scythe touched them all.
That passed over, this can too.
Her nest, now empty: husband off to war,
looking for glory and gold.
Lost a hand but swore he had buried, on a hill
clearly marked, a great treasure store.
Before he recovered his health or his wealth,
the festering wound took his life,
leaving behind a sad, destitute wife.
That passed over, this can too.

The farm was lost, to town she moved. Crowds,
bustle, smells and dirt.
Work in a tavern, liberties taken. Thought of as
easy; the tears flowed.
Because of her strength she found work on
the road.
Cobbles she lay; backbreaking work, age
creeping on.
Lonely, worn out, she stopped for rest. The low
autumn sunshine forced her eyes shut.
Prays for respite and a warm patch of land, to
see out her days in the sun.
Slipped into repose for one last time, now out of
pain, out of breath, out of life
A clearer light to follow to heavenly rest.
Hilda passed over, we all will too.

By Geoffrey Skidmore
The Interesting Hoard

The hoard is like a beautiful girl
Fragile, gentle.
Very detailed.

But there is a feeling of anger because
someone is coming to start a war.

The seahorse is like the rain
On a stormy day
Fighting against the waves.

By Yuwen Ni
Who Had Me Made?

I am the Sea Horse with the twisting tail; I am the Sea Horse of the intricate patterns

See how my eye turns upon you.

What am I for? What halls have I graced? Who caused me to be made?

Come gather round me and I will tell you the tale.

A king ordered my making,

Gave the gold and the skill of the craftsmen to create my design and make me come alive.

A great man, a warrior, slayer and vanquisher of our enemy, the Danes.

But this king was also a man who loved learning and heard the word of the Lord.

And it was he who ordained a book, a wondrous book to contain the teachings of our Saviour Jesus Christ.
I am the Sea Horse with the twisting tail; I am the Sea Horse of the intricate patterns

And my eye watched the making of this book.

Watched as the flowing movements on the page formed the words,

Watched as the brush was dipped and the glorious illustrations filled with vivid colour decorated the leaves,

Watched as the delicate leaves of gold gave richness to the work.

And then came the binding, take care, oh take care and then the book, this mighty book lay there complete.

No not quite complete, for I had not yet fulfilled my purpose.

For there on the cover of this great work lay a space,

And there was I placed, the Sea Horse, to shine and be an ornament to this wondrous work of Holy Scripture.
And now, for all of you who have gathered, I shall state the last part of my tale

For you should know that:

I am the Sea Horse of the twisting tail; I am the Sea Horse of the intricate patterns.

And my eye has seen that it was Alfred the King who ordered me made.

By Lynda Lea
Morgane

Hoar frost lay white on the ground,
Morgane’s eyes in vain sought help.
Succour was there none.
The boy child lay dead at her breast.
That passed over, this can too.

Spring brought wind and rain and flood.
Edgar knew not how to provide.
His lord cared not for them.
His will alone was not enough.
That passed over, this can too.

The youth stared at the bright sun,
Which mocked and taunted his pain.
Corey’s love was promised
To another who loved her not.
That passed over, this can too.

Then battle called yet again,
He followed where’re his lord led.
Boden feared for his life,
Would that he might return alive.
That passed over, this can too.

By Gaynor Macdonald
The Past Day

It will look like sunshine at the morning
And he will be a handsome man.

But angry too, because he is going to fight
To kill someone.

By Samson Mehabton
The Hoard

It looks like new gold but it is old gold. Sunshine on a cloudy day. A happy man. Happy because he is strong.

By Rahel Mehabtom
That Passed Over, This Can Too

Gertrude young and fresh
Wanted to talk to the soldiers,
Soldiers in the woods ready for battle.
She left bruised and bleeding, confused, in shame.
She loves her daughter, and the soldiers are coming again.
That passed over, this can too.

Robert feller of trees, happy in the morning
Starts to build a hall for the king.
Sadness arrives in the afternoon
His fourth child dies, coming into the world.
That passed over, this can too.

I hear tell Hildagarth, her grief is great
She loved the child, in her womb for nine months.
Now she cannot sleep, or love again.
That passed over, this can too.

Egbert a friend to all in the village
Cannot find a partner to multiply with
His one true love died, his mind is set on battles
To find glory and satisfaction.
That passed over, this can too.

By Heather J Anderson
Hoard Image

The cross is like sunshine shining through the afternoon.
A brave young man
Strong like metal.
Gold like the knife.

The hoard feels fierce,
Angry.

Someone stole these things.

By Yuting Ni
The Hoard

The helmet is thunder
Bad weather
Heavy rain.

The pen is mightier than the sword:
Trying to convince people with ideas and words
is more effective than trying to force them to do
what you want.

But the hoard is an old man.
If you touch him you might break him.
Just as when you push an old man.

By Omer Omer
Story Hoard

Heather Anderson
A Time of Fear

I came with a vengeance and battered your door
I swept through the village so swiftly
And the men you all swore
To guard you all bravely
Women and children, shrank back in fear
Would you lose everything now?
That you hold so dear?
Terrified you pray
To your Gods
Each night and day
Your Gods heard your cry
When I was gone
You stepped through the door
Nothing but devastation
Was what you all saw
When I returned
I brought you no fear
Laughter and singing
The heavens did hear
You gathered the harvest
And were full of good cheer
Yet you still remembered
The time when I brought you such fear

By Lavinia Bousfield
Regon’s Prayer

Regon the shepherd read the skies,
Saw the storm approach warned the settlement.
His flock in the long house safe and dry.
The storm breaks, its power unremitting.
That passed over, this can too.

Two strangers came unseen unheard.
One carried a bag heavy with silver and gold.
The other brought tools crude and basic,
Dug a hole buried their hoard.
A gold ring fallen from the bag
Lay trodden in the mud the men, unaware,
Leave hurriedly, furtively,
Unseen, unheard.
That passed over, this can too.

Regon the shepherd now knew sadness.
The village decimated, crops destroyed.
Nothing remained whole, they must rebuild.
With nothing to trade all seemed hopeless.
Lives in ruin, the storm had won.
That passed over, this can too.

In the midst of devastation life went on.
Regon tended his flock prayed for help.
In the mud he sees the ring, wiped it clean.
Story Hoard

Looked to the heavens gave thanks.
Gold traded for chattels and goods.
Happiness.
A simple prayer answered, a village saved.
That passed over, this can too.

The two strangers would never know
How their carelessness answered Regon’s prayer.
Regon the shepherd would never know
That beneath his feet lay a hoard of gold.
That passed over, this can too.

The twenty-first-century the hoard is found.
Restoration of the treasures well under way.
No personal items, a puzzle never to be solved.
They can never know there was but one —
A gold ring that saved a village.
That passed over, this can too.

By Doreen Goodall
For You Hassan Jan, on your Birthday

I went for a quiet walk in the nearby wood, aiming to realign my body and soul, while embracing the beautiful sunshine and treasuring your gift of life, reflected on the wisdom of our ancestors, worshipping the foundation of life; be the sun, fire or the light!

Then remembered 6th of DAY, 1357 and the destructive fire, when the firemen were not ALLOWED to stop the fire!

Then you came along, with your usual brave action and the ability to empower nation, restored our beloved Astaneh with the help of public bath’s hose!

How spooky is it, talking about you and your best mate, he then calls from far away and remembers your birthday even after three decades!

By Fatemeh Rabiee
Riddles
A Riddle

Those who follow my voice may find me generous.
Though fickle, many have received my gifts.
I serve best a patient master.
The splendours of kings rise at my calling.
Earth-swallowed and frozen in time.
From their fingers to yours.
So prick your ears and wield me wisely.
For treasure awaits!

By Adam Staples
Story Hoard

Riddle One

Dare you fight with me?
I would bite you, tear you into shreds.
I would burn everything around me.
I am fire, a shouting, a broken mirror, blood
flowing down your arm.
Kill me, or I will ruin you.

Riddle Two

I am very naughty.
I like to play hide-and-seek with people.
I might be nowhere; I might be everywhere.
I may sit in a beautiful garden smiling, or
wander on an insignificant corner.
Sometimes people feel frustrated that
They can’t find me even when they try very,
very hard.
But sometimes, when you look at the flickering
candlelight before sleep,
You find me.

By Christina Liao
Foe or Friend?

I am the loving friend, kind nurse, and slow sure healer,
My salve spreads over every man and beast,
I calm swine, horse, infant, warrior and crone alike
With my creeping pursuit.
Friend to the traveller, rest to the troubled I am,
Foe to the watchman, swift death to the axe man
Still loved by every man, and child.
I gift back all strength while I wrest it and senses away.
Some fear me and fight me, some give me glad welcome.
Paths taken without me pitch stumbling and falling to doom.
Man cannot live without me, I look like his death.

The Marker

Round at the end of length,
Curved at the end of sharp.
Taking light and changing light’s straight path.
Hand that strokes me moves in fear
Yet I make man brave so he wants to kill.
Great heat and yielding made me,
Story Hoard

Hard to slay and so cold.
Marked by man’s hand, I make mark in flesh.
Working cleanly, I must after be cleaned.
Filth from earth, with water I ripple and shine,
Giving force to your arm I can take strength away.
Strong friend, well feared foe - I am both,
Waved in victory, grabbed in loss
When you die I live on.

By Lorraine Boyce
A Riddle

We lay together, but not where we fell,
From bloody battle we came.
The gore crow dismembered our masters.
The best of us, violated, were broken apart.
Gathered by the victor’s hand and buried in the cold earth.

Thirteen hundred years we lay, waiting for the light.
Delicate hands did stroke us, hoping our story to unfold.
We can’t tell what we know — who fought — who fell.
We forget who it was who buried us, or why they never returned.
Look on us and marvel; and write our story yourselves.

By Geoffrey Skidmore
Riddle One

Oft times, both man and woman feel my gentleness and care.
I walk beside them and support them with my strength.
If the need is such, I clothe myself in cruelty for disguise, but always
I give comfort to the wounded heart and soul.

Riddle Two

I go forth with the swordsman,
My duty to protect,
The battlefield, our world.
There is no other home or solace.
Choice have we none, but to serve.
Wind and snow hinder him, but do not hurt me.
We lie on the muddy ground for our resting place.
Now for the final time, we are broken and split apart.

By Gaynor Macdonald
Riddle One

It crept silently
I was unaware
Surprise took me over
I didn’t resist
One day it came again
From a different direction
There was thunder-lightening
After the storm
Happiness and contentment
Will I see it again?

Riddle Two

I am strong
I am gentle
I help the young
So they too grow strong
Man tends me daily
I don’t speak to him.
The meadow is sweet
The river flows by as I silently watch it
As I silently watch it.
Riddle Three

The sun warm on my skin
It changes my colour
Sometimes I hide behind leaves
The maiden will hold me tight
Let my skin rub against hers
Her lips are soft
She devours me
Eve knows of my beauty
Didn’t want to be remembered through sin.

By Heather J Anderson
Riddle

She peeped through the blinds and smiled, then rested on the picture.
She played on the floor, then darted for the door.

The blinds yawned and stretched their arms.
Her face lit up the room
As she played hide and seek and danced ‘round till noon.

By Ann Cullen
Worn with Pride

Formed by nature through the years
For man to bring me into the light
Then I was burned and beaten
Yet I endured for man to see
The look of envy they displayed
When with pride I was worn
Garnets and gold adorned me
I gleamed in the sunny dawn
I went with him into battle
With all his might he fought
It was like a feast of eagles
Attacking the prey they caught

When he swooped down upon them
His skill in battle did show
I felt his sweat upon me
As I guard him from his foe

Together to the hill top
In triumph we did go
He had me to protect him
A job well done, I know
Story Hoard

If you think I am his sword
I will answer no to thee
My owner’s grin half hidden
Can you guess what I can be?

By Lavinia Bousfield
My Story

I am said to have travelled the world
Yet I accumulate here
Standing apart from others, I lived in high office
Forgotten I became fragmented
My position installed me upon injury and death
Now I have been rendered to sit in your hand
Though I do not emit weakness
My grandeur can leave you inspired
Small in size, giant in achievement
Hidden secrets, mystery, which inspires stories
What were once violent, stolen objects of monetary value
Now belong to the people as objects of beauty,
Which stand to shed light on a Dark Age

The Lure of That Which Captivates

My skin gleams in the sun
I have the ability to enrich a culture
Yet destroy a civilisation
My admiration is above all others
Crafted I become a symbol of man
I stand apart, unique to the creator
My uses many, my possibility endless
The value of what I hold may be expressed in many ways
Religious, practical, or pleasure
Yet I was put with others for wealth
My worth not majesty
But I say as I was lost in wealth I was found because of it
And still I draw you in.

By Connor Robinson
Riddle

I am a symbol of good. Do not be afraid to wear me on a chain around your neck. I can protect you from evil.

My four corners may point North, South, East and West but my direction for you is to paradise.

My metal is pure as God is pure.

My stone, when in shadow, is the crimson blood of death but, in sunlight, the light of hope, peace and the resurrection.

I will be there for you in this life but God will keep you safe forever.

By Bob Burton
Stories
Story Hoard
A True Ghost Story

I gained permission to search some land around an old blacksmith’s cottage. I found some old florins and placed them on the owner’s doorstep for him to find.

A week later when I met him he looked a little agitated. “Did you put the florins on the step?” he asked. He seemed relieved when I said “yes.” He took me into his workshop, sat me down and told me that a pair of hands haunted the cottage. Small objects mysteriously moved around on their own from time to time. My placing of the coins on the doorstep was particularly ill-timed as the previous owner of the cottage had recently called and the talk was about the visitations of the ghost.

It was great to return the florins as I did not want any ghostly hands calling on me to reclaim them!

By Bob Burton
His hands screamed against the cold in the fresh morning air. Alf couldn’t remember a March this bitter since childhood. He tried to tighten his fraying woollen cloak around his sweating, slave-like body, but relented pretty quickly; now was not the time to keep warm, now was the time to work fast. The sun was still but a sleeping orb on the horizon, infant-like in its size and power, but before Alf blinked much more, Woden’s golden mirror would rest high in the firmament, shining unwelcome light across every acre of the kingdom. Alf and his deeds in this tiny corner of Mercia would be given no quarter, would have no exception. More so than all that, the rays from the sun would surely blind him, reflecting off the treasure he would soon be fishing through his hands, the same hands that were rubbed red-raw with pain and cold and guilt. Stepping closer to the solitary tree that grew atop the plateau (the Romans having chopped all this patch of Albion’s arboreal growth for firewood, it seemed, during their fort-building rule across the land), Alf shook his head as if banishing a fly. Nay, not guilt. A have no a thing to feel guilty of. Tis anger that runs through me, justified anger. An ire so sweet and righteous
it turns my heart to stone and makes garnet of my skin.

Struggling with his task despite the coolness of the daybreak, Alf kept on, wheezing heavily as he lowered the sack gently down, or as gently as his creasing back would let him. He chanced a look across the countryside, still drowsy in night’s sure fist, though getting lighter by the second. The tumbling majesty of Letocetum sent mocking shadows towards him, as his eyes found themselves irresistibly drawn towards Watling Street, and a whole cast of hideous characters that may or may not be lurking down there this very second, ready to denounce and attack him once they stepped out of the gloom. A chill raced through Alf’s sandy hair and pitiful beard, this time lacking all connection with the frosty spring. Contradictions climbed inside him as they always did; a Northumbrian in Mercia’s heartland; a thrall-like face endowed with a nobleman’s air; a traitor in the early morning mist.

Gingerly, as if he were snatching a starling out the net, moving a child held safe in sleep’s embrace, or coaxing a woman to feel pleasure at his fingertips again, Alf delved deep inside the rough linen bag and brought forth his first
sacrifice. The rude letters glinted at him with a sickening delight; *Surge domine et disepentur inimici tui et fugent qui oderunt te a facie tua*. The words swam in Alf’s mind, the misspelt inscription awakening a thousand memories within. Suddenly, all Alf’s yesterdays lived once more; his newly-baptised father stood in front of him, as solid as flesh, his harsh northern tongue intoning the Christian’s wisdom with a passion that passed terrifying. How ironic that the one enemy who did scatter, who was driven from the face of the family land, turned out to be the very boy who, all those years ago, sat riveted before his Lord, adoring and unswerving as a son ever was. With a phlegm-filled sniff, Alf hauled himself back to the present. If he wanted to bury this hoard before the day truly broke, he’d better get a move on.

*By Emma Whitney*
A Period of Time in King Offa's Reign

Offa came to the Mercian throne after a period of civil war following the assassination of King Aethelbald. History has it that his own bodyguards treacherously murdered King Aethelbald at night.

Beorned succeeded Aethelbald and ruled Mercia for a short time. Offa pursued Beorned and drove him out of Mercia within the first year of his rule. Offa seized the Mercian Kingdom and reigned from 757AD until his death in July 796AD.

Under Offa, Mercia became the most powerful of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. He was a 'bretwalda,' - an overlord of other kings and was regarded as one of the most powerful rulers of the time. He was the first ruler to be called ‘King of the English.’

By 771 King Offa controlled Kent and Sussex, although his authority did not remain unchallenged in either territory. Offa’s control of Kent allowed him to establish a trade route out of London along the Thames, increasing foreign trade.
Two hundred years after the Romans left Britain, money was mostly gone out of use. As Anglo-Saxon kingdoms emerged, gold coins from the Continent and later from routes in England started to circulate. Offa realised that the Mercian coinage needed to be improved to a specification acceptable to the Franks if there was to be successful trading between the two kingdoms.

As a result in the 760s he introduced an effective coinage that lasted for centuries - a new form of penny. It was thinner, broader and struck in much finer silver. His silver pennies were the first standard coins issued in England, most bore the King’s name and face but a few had that of his queen, Cynethryth. Offa’s wife, Queen Cynethryth, is the only Anglo-Saxon queen ever depicted on a coin.

The kings of Kent had an established relationship with the kings of Francia and Offa may have instituted his own connections with the Frankish court around this time. He made an alliance by marrying Cynethryth who seems to have wielded considerable power at the court of King Offa. Records indicate that she gave birth to a son, Ecgfrith and four daughters: Aelfflaed, Eadburh, Aethelburh and Aethelswith.
Her name first appears in her husband’s charters after the birth of her son, Ecgfrith, in 770. By 780 Cynethryth was ‘Queen of the Mercians.’

Alciun of York, an English scholar who spent over ten years at King Charlemagne’s court as a chief adviser, wrote to the royal household calling Cynethryth “pious”. He emphasized the legitimacy of her marriage with Offa and the legitimacy of her children and their suitability to inherit the throne of Mercia. Alciun wrote: “The marriage of Offa and Cynethryth was met with the approval of the church hierarchy.”

Offa managed to persuade Pope Adrian I to divide the archdiocese of Canterbury in two, thus creating a new archdiocese of Lichfield. Offa did this to weaken the power of Janberht, Bishop of Canterbury, who had conflict with him and did not want to consecrate Offa’s son Ecgfrith, of Mercia, as king.

In the first recorded coronation in England, King Offa’s son Ecgfrith was consecrated and hailed king in the year 787AD in Offa’s lifetime.

King Offa gained the respect of the mighty Charlemagne, King of the Franks and Emperor of the Romans. With their dealings Offa
instigated trade with Europe and brought in tutors from the continent that encouraged learning.

In 789 Cynethryth wanted to marry Ecgfrith to King Charlemagne’s daughter. She also wanted to marry her daughter, Eadburg, to Charlemagne’s legitimate son. This did not happen. Offa visited Rome in 792 to strengthen his links with the papacy.

Ecgfrith died childless and held the kingdom of Mercia for one hundred and forty one days after Offa’s death. He was king of Mercia from July to December 796.

Apparently Offa had arranged the murder of closer relatives in order to eliminate dynastic rivals. According to Alcuin of York: “Ecgfrith did not die for his sins but the vengeance for the blood shed by his father. For Offa shed much blood to secure the kingdom upon his son.’

Offa gave his daughter, Aelffled, in marriage to the Northumbrian King Aethelred I in 792. In the words of a modern day historian “Offa was driven by a lust for power, not a vision of English unity; and what he left was a reputation, not a legacy.” Offa’s dominance never extended
to Northumbria. Aethelred, king of Northumbria was killed by his own people on April 19th 796.

In the 780s King Offa extended Mercian supremacy over most of southern England, allying with King Beorhtric of Wessex, who married Offa’s daughter, Eadburh. King Offa took control of the southeast and he also became the overlord of East Anglia.

Queen Eadburg accidently killed her husband King Beorhtric of Wessex by poisoning him. She fled to Francia and ruined the opportunity of marrying Charlemagne’s son. She was appointed as the abbess of a convent. She is said to have fornicated with an English exile and was expelled from the monastery and ended her days begging in the streets of Avia. Eadburh is legendary known as an evil queen.

Most of Offa’s written laws and charters were lost in the turmoil that the English faced after 787, when the Vikings arrived.

By Ann Cullen
The Loaf

Edith smiled to herself as she pummelled the dough on the slate slab. This loaf was special, she’d sown and harvested the rye, ground it to flour and now was preparing to bake a very special loaf. A loaf for her family, for the whole community. A loaf to share, to bind everyone together as the grains of flour were bound in the bread itself.

As she bent over the slab over the dough, her back ached. Edith paused briefly to rub it hard with her knuckles, excitement growing in her blue eyes. A slight figure slipped into the Mead Hall, looking anxious, her young sister, Hilda.

`What are you doing here? Why aren’t you kneading the dough at home, in our hut, or out by the bread oven? Are you hiding in here?’ she demanded.

Putting a clean linen cloth over the dough Edith stroked Hilda’s fine blonde hair. `It is a special day for me. I am making the bread in the meeting hall, as it is to celebrate a meeting. Someone is coming, soon.’
Edith knew her sister was full of excited
questions but just smiled and would answer
none of them save one. ‘The bread stays here
to rise now, I will come back later to take it to the
bread oven. Now I am going for a walk, alone.’

She watched Hilda reluctantly dawdling back
to their family hut, flicking her spindle around
as she went, doubtless wondering why her
sister was so strange today. Why would she
take time to herself? As soon as her mother
saw Hilda she would find her errands to do,
gathering wood for the fire, stirring the great
steaming pot of stew cooking over the smoky
fire, fetching water.

Meanwhile Edith slowly climbed the hill outside
the village. By the time she reached the top she
was breathing hard and sank into the soft fern
fronds, smelling the honey scent of heather on
the breeze. She tilted her face to the sky, eyes
closed, enjoying the warm spring sunshine on
her face. Soon the visitor would be here but
also the dough would be risen, need taking to
the outdoor oven with its glowing ashes. Making
her way down she paused often to catch her
breath, to pick flowers, blue and white. She
laughed at the antics of the sheep and stooped
awkwardly for a drink from the cool stream tumbling sparkling down beside her. Halfway down Edith gasped and fell to her knees on the sheep-cropped grass by a mountain ash. Groaning she felt her pains increase, fade away, return stronger. Folded in her apron she had herbs the wise woman had pressed upon her. Gritting her teeth as she chewed their bitterness she saw the blue sky, the red rowanberries recede then appear to throb around her. That was better, Edith found she could relax between the pains, cosy in her drugged dream, and after a while her work was over. Or, she reflected, just beginning. As she made her way downwards, cautiously avoiding loose stones and slippery mud, she remembered her loaf. Well, that won’t be baked today, yet as she neared the meeting hall she smelled fresh bread, saw Hilda proudly holding a loaf wrapped in white linen cloth. ‘My first baking,’ she announced, ‘I guessed you were delayed.’ With a quick hug for Hilda, Edith took a deep breath and entered the meeting hall. She strode proudly into the gathering and greeted her Lord, the loaf in one hand and his newborn, firstborn son gently cradled on her other arm.

By Lorraine Boyce
The mound that would surround and bury the great Mercian King, Penda, had yet to be erected. His body lay at peace in the grand monumental hall, surrounded by the finery he would take to the afterlife. The wound that killed him, so savage, so blatant, started sharply at top of his skull and had cleaved downwards, cutting through his face, jugular and curving deeply across his ribs.

His nemesis, Oswiu, had taken the sword from its slashing motion and thrust the weapon as far as it would go, ensuring the devastation of the king’s pounding heart. The blood had made scarlet the grass beneath him and ran in rivulets beside him down a slope into the river below. The water of the Winwaed ran crimson and the clouds above his dying body darkened and threatened, menacing the air, electric, cloying and laden with the anger of the Pagan gods.

Penda had been cut off from his retinue of close allies and loyal warriors. The king stood alone, vulnerable. He had been thrown from his great stallion after an axe had been hurled into its chest at great force, causing the animal
to shriek and rear in agony. Penda knew these were his last moments. He had experienced them before. Some months earlier he visited Cynwere, the most renowned seer of her time. Cynwere had made Penda swallow a small vial of liquid and the visions came on strong and quick. Now he was seeing them again, reliving his exact emotions as each portent played itself out, one after another. Once again he witnessed his own demise, but this time in the present and very real.

By Lisa Grace
A heavy mist shrouded the countryside, the kind of mist that daylight could barely penetrate. The shepherd ran and ran in a blind panic until he fell to the ground exhausted. Due to the mist he could not see any identifiable landmarks so he had no idea where he was or how far he had run.

After a while he recovered enough to sit up. As he did so, he wrapped his arms around himself and drew his legs up to his body as if to make himself as small as possible. He sobbed uncontrollably.

The shepherd had an eerie feeling that there was someone there. His senses were right; when he looked up he saw an elderly man leaning on a shepherd’s crook watching him.

He observed that the man had a bearded, kindly face and concluded that he must be very rich because his garments were made of fine cloth and his footwear was of soft leather.

The shepherd wiped his eyes on his sleeve, jumped up, turned and ran until a high dry-stone wall prevented him from going any further. He ran because, in the mist, the man looked ethereal, like some kind of celestial being.

The man followed him and continued to watch him.
‘What are you looking at?’ demanded the shepherd rudely.

‘At a guess I’d say someone who is in need of help,’ replied the old man, ignoring the shepherd’s rudeness.

‘Well I don’t happen to need any help,’ scowled the shepherd. ‘Who are you anyway?’

The man drew nearer, ‘Oh, I’m merely a pilgrim.’

‘How can you be ‘merely’ a pilgrim?’ scoffed the shepherd. ‘You either are or your not. Anyway you don’t look like a pilgrim.’

‘Oh, why is that then?’ smiled the man.

‘For one thing, you’re rich. No ordinary pilgrim could afford the kind of finery you’re wearing.’

‘True, but then, pilgrims come from all walks of life.’

‘Well don’t let me keep you, if you’re a pilgrim you must have somewhere to go.’

Once more the old man ignored the shepherd’s rudeness. ‘As a matter of fact I’m on my way to The Cave of the Spirits high in the mountains. I hear it’s a sacred place where people take gifts and offer up prayers to ensure they have a good harvest and rear fine livestock.’

The shepherd pulled a face. ‘Apparently it’s not a bit dull; in fact I’m told it’s all very festive.'
Have you never been?’
   ‘No, I’m glad to say, I’m not one for festivities.’
   ‘Now why does that not surprise me,’ said the old man sarcastically. ‘I’ve been on many pilgrimages but never on this particular one. I’m quite looking forward to it.’
   ‘The shepherd became agitated. ‘Look, what makes you think I’m interested.’
   The old man sighed and shook his head, ‘You seem very troubled to me my son, why don’t we sit on the grass up against the wall for a while and you can tell me what ails you. I’m a very good listener.’
   ‘I’m not your son, all right, and no you can’t help me. No one can. That is unless you saw it.’
   Suddenly the shepherd became distraught, grabbed the old man by the shoulders and shook him violently. ‘Did you see it?’ he shouted in the old man’s face.
   ‘Get off me,’ demanded the pilgrim. ‘Calm down. Did I see what?’
   ‘The monster of course,’ sobbed the shepherd as he sat down against the wall, ‘the fearful beast.’
   The old man looked incredulous as he sat beside him, ‘A monster?’
   ‘Yes, the beast that destroyed my village and killed everyone in it.’
‘Well, not quite everyone,’ said the old man with a wry smile, ‘as you’re still very much alive. How did you manage to escape the massacre?’

The shepherd looked around to make sure the beast was not there in the mist listening. ‘I hid in a barrel,’ he replied quietly, ‘until it had gone. Then I started running and ended up here, wherever that is.’

The old man looked amused, ‘How very resourceful of you.’

‘It’s nothing to smile about, everyone was screaming but it was worse when the screaming stopped and everything went quiet. I could hear it breathing, which was more than I was doing.’

‘As I recall,’ said the old man thoughtfully, ‘my father used to tell me stories about a monster when I was a boy but that’s all they were, stories.’

‘You were lucky to have a father to tell you any kind of stories, I never knew my father but what happened in my village was no story. The beast not only killed all the people it also killed my flock of sheep and goats.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ sympathised the old man, ‘but you must put it all behind you and start again.’

‘That’s easy for you to say, I’m not rich like you, and I’ve nothing to trade, I even lost my shepherd’s crook. It was very much like the one
you carry in fact,’ said the shepherd snatching it off the old man. ‘It is mine, I swear it, I’d know it anywhere because I whittled it myself. I lost it when I fled the beast. Where did you find it? Wait a minute! You were there, you must have been.’

‘Nonsense,’ roared the old man, snatching it back. ‘This crook cannot possibly be yours because it has been in my family for generations, my grandfather and my father before me took it on many a pilgrimage. It’s purely symbolic of course.’

The shepherd stood up and rounded on the old man, ‘I know every mark on that crook,’ he ranted, ‘because I made them. I’m not educated, so I devised and cut a series of notches down the shaft. Look, there, they helped me with the counting of my sheep and goats.’

‘Most shepherds’ crooks have such marks,’ said the old man defiantly, ‘it’s obviously a case of mistaken identity on your part.’

But the shepherd knew the man was lying and vowed he would get ‘his’ crook back before the day was out.

After this there was a long angry silence as the two men were lost in their own thoughts. ‘This monster of yours, can you describe it for me?’ said the old man breaking the silence.
The shepherd jumped up excitedly, ‘I’ll say I can. It was as tall as a tree,’ he said using his arms animatedly to help with his description. ‘It had a massive head with a mouth so big it could swallow a sheep whole and an inner jaw that could take a man’s head off.’ The shepherd lowered his voice for effect. ‘It had tusks, like spears each side of its mouth and I saw it pick up a grown man with one of its huge clawed hands. It destroyed the village with just a few swipes of its great tail.’ The shepherd sat back down slowly. ‘I never saw such horror.’

The old man patted the shepherd’s arm, ‘But at least you lived to tell the tale,’ he said, ‘so it wasn’t all bad.’

‘True,’ replied the shepherd proudly.

‘Ah, good,’ said the old man getting up off the grass. ‘The mist is lifting, it might be a glorious day after all.’

‘What do I care?’ grumbled the shepherd. ‘It’s bound to be too hot for me.’

‘There really is no pleasing you is there? Look, why don’t you come with me to the cave, after all there’s nothing to keep you here, and you never know, you might even enjoy it,’ he said doubtfully.

The shepherd looked at the old man’s fine clothes then down at his own dirty rough garb. ‘Trouble is, if everyone’s dressed as fine as you
I’ll stand out.’
‘Don’t worry, there will be all sorts there, rich, poor, young, old, you’ll be fine, trust me.’
That was the trouble; the shepherd did not trust him. But he knew he had to stick close to him if he wanted to get his crook back.
‘Alright I’ll come,’ said the shepherd mournfully, ‘but I doubt I’ll enjoy it.’
‘I’m overwhelmed by your enthusiasm,’ said the old man.
‘Thank you,’ said the shepherd, totally oblivious to the old pilgrim’s sarcasm. ‘What time does it begin?’
‘We need to be there by noon,’ he told him.

The two men strode along side by side. No two people could have looked more different.
‘So, were you happy in your village?’ asked the old man conversationally.
‘Very,’ replied the shepherd. ‘I had my own enclosure, and a fine flock of sheep and goats.
‘Do you like sheep and goats?’
‘Oh yes, I love sheep and goats,’ said the old man trying not to laugh, ‘but didn’t you have any friends?’
‘What would I want with friends? I prefer sheep and goats. You know where you are with sheep and goats. What about you?’
‘Me, I love people, the more the merrier.’
During their walk the pilgrim found that the total of the shepherd’s conversation was sheep, goats and monsters. Apart from that, much to the old man’s chagrin, he moaned incessantly about everything.

No more so than when they reached the road, which was little more than a track used mainly by ox carts and was badly rutted and stony.

The shepherd found it really hard going and said so over and over again, whereas the old man did not seem to find it a problem, he simply glided over the uneven surface.

‘How do you do that?’ demanded the shepherd.

‘Do what?’ asked the old man.

‘Glide over the ruts like they’re not there?’

‘I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,’ said the old man feigning ignorance, ‘anyway, this is where we leave the track and begin our climb.’

The shepherd frowned, ‘I’m not looking forward to that.’

‘You do surprise me,’ said the old man under his breath.

By now, the mist that had dogged the morning had dispersed and the sun had taken over. ‘It’s going to be a glorious afternoon,’ said the pilgrim raising his arms.

Exactly as he had done on the track the
old man seemed to glide up the side of the mountain with no effort. He was not even breathless. He stopped and turned to see the shepherd struggling up the steep incline behind him, puffing and panting.

‘Come along, keep up, you’re not used to exercise are you? Here’s me I’m twice your age!’

Under his breath the shepherd cursed the old man, the mountain, the sun and the beast for getting him into this situation. ‘I knew I shouldn’t have come,’ he panted.

‘You didn’t have to come with me. I didn’t force you. We have to make our own choices in life and not blame others when we get it wrong.’

‘If you say so,’ mumbled the disgruntled shepherd.

‘Come on, cheer up, we’re nearly there. Listen, you can hear the people.’

The shepherd pulled a face. ‘What do I care for people?’ he said. ‘I loved my sheep and goats.’

The pilgrim sighed. ‘He’s a lost cause,’ he muttered to himself. ‘I can do no more; I’ve had enough of him. It’s time to put him out of his own misery. He’s done nothing but moan and grumble about every little thing.’

He turned to the shepherd, ‘Er, this monster, or beast as you called it, did it look like this?’
But the shepherd did not have time to answer the question. In the blink of an eye the pilgrim transformed into the monster that the shepherd had described to him so animatedly. Suffice to say, he never did get his crook back.

The monster let out a satisfied roar, turned and made its way towards the Cave of the Spirits.

As it did so its great tail swished from side to side.

* 

‘The trait’ came to ‘the pilgrim’ over many generations, exclusively through the male line of his family. But alas, to his great sadness, he was the last. He had no sons, only two daughters.

However, he felt there was hope. Recently he had become a grandfather. The pilgrim had smiled to himself, could it be possible that his grandson had inherited ‘the trait’? Could he be the next ‘pilgrim’?

For all our sakes, we can only hope not.

By Doreen Goodall
Story Hoard
Hagan looked warily around as his companion stripped the body of valuables. ‘Be quick, don’t linger here,’ he said. He frowned as he noticed the mist across the battlefield drifting away. Soon they would be seen.

Edwin grinned and grunted with satisfaction. They had done well, and would be glad to get away from the awful stench of death. He stared at his mud and blood stained clothes and stood up with the bag filled with the valuables. ‘Better keep to the trees and bushes and hide until it’s safe, then go on,’ said Hagan. ‘We are not far from the old Roman road. We will be able to travel down it later. We should have gone with the others. They will be home by now, celebrating our victory in the mead hall.’

They hugged the banks of a nearby river. Slipping in the mud they crept silently away. Hagan held up his hand, he listened. Only birds and the rustle of the morning breeze blowing towards them could be heard. He drew himself up to his full height beside his wife’s brother. Slowly they peered over the riverbank. When all was clear, they scrambled up and made their way to the woods.
Hagan kept watch while Edwin slept. His mind went over the events of the past few days. He had said goodbye to his tearful wife and children. He knew he might never see them again. The bile had risen up in his mouth when he prepared himself for battle. He had been afraid yet would never show his fear. Edwin looked up to him and believed he was the bravest of the village men. They had fought side-by-side protecting each other. The battle cry had echoed from the many men and he still remembered the awful killing, which seemed endless.

Brave men had died and the cries of the wounded were all around them. He washed the worst of the blood off in the river and now he was hungry and tired. He gently shook Edwin awake. Then lay down upon his cloak, falling instantly into an exhausted sleep.

Refreshed from sleep, Edwin watched for any danger that might threaten them. This had been his first battle. Fourteen years old, he had taken up his late father’s sword and shield into battle. He had sworn an oath with the others to defend his king and gone bravely into battle.

Ordered to stay by Hagan’s side he wielded his father’s sword the way he had been taught. He
soon became covered in blood. He shuddered when he realised it wasn’t his blood. Full of amazement he knew how lucky he had been. Hagan had looked around. Slapped him on the shoulder and laughed.

When the battle had been won, the men had helped their wounded and begun stripping their victims. Edwin had filled their bag with what gold he could dismantle from helmets and swords and off the clothing of the enemy. Others had gathered the sword blades to be reused. Other useful items they loaded onto the wagon and departed.

They had been left behind. Now they would have to make their way back together. Hagan opened his eyes to find Edwin staring out from the bushes. The lad had shown his bravery and apart from the small cut on his arm had emerged unharmed. He had promised his wife he would take care of Edwin after their father had died. ‘Why didn’t you wake me?’ Hagan said, looking up at the sun glistening through the branches of the trees.

‘I thought you needed to sleep. I kept a good watch over you. Did you know you snore?’ ‘More reason to wake me then,’ said Hagan,
grinning. He watched Edwin sorting through the bag. He took out a few small objects with garnets and delicate filigree worked into the gold. He ran his fingers over them and marvelled at the workmanship involved in producing them. ‘Do you think they belonged to a rich Chieftain or King? Edwin said.

Hagan shrugged his shoulders. ‘Once melted down, we shall use the gold and garnets for trading. Come, the sun tells me we have delayed long enough.’ He helped Edwin put them back into the bag and they made their way out of the woods. Keeping a careful watch, they made their way to the old Roman road and set off for home. The sun beat warmly upon their damp clothing, and the air smelt fresh. Edwin picked a few berries on the way, which helped to stem the hunger gnawing at their empty stomachs.

Hearing the sound of horse’s hooves they dived for cover. They watched fearfully when about thirty warriors passed close by them. After they had gone, Hagan said, ‘We had better bury this hoard of gold. We can return later when it safe.’ He looked around at the field behind them. ‘This place will do. We can bury the bag up on that slope. I shall remember this field. I have passed
this way often enough over the years with my father. It will be handy being close by the Roman road.’

They climbed halfway up the slope in the field and began to quickly bury the hoard in the soft earth amongst the thistles and wild flowers. Satisfied they had covered their tracks they made their way back to the road. Hagan looked back up the field and smiled, he had so much to tell his wife and children when they returned home.

They walked on the road keeping an eye out until dusk and decided to rest near some trees. They settled down for the night. Hagan took the first watch and let the lad sleep. All was quiet when he awoke Edwin to take over the watch. Edwin huddled in his cloak, to keep the night air from his body. Time passed slowly until he saw the dawn coming. He turned in the direction he heard a bird whistle. Too late, he realised it wasn’t a bird. The light was strong enough for him to see a man with a bow full drawn. He froze in terror. Before he could utter a word of warning he felt the arrow enter his chest. Half the shaft had driven through him and he fell with a thud to the ground.
Hagan was quickly on his feet. Sword in hand he donned his helmet. He sensed the mortal danger he found himself in when another arrow entered the body of Edwin. With a curse Hagan faced his enemy who came out from the shadows of the trees in the early mist.

He knew he was doomed. Yet fought until his knees buckled under him from the many blows he received. A cry of defiance left his lips, and the sword fell from his fist. The last thing he remembered was a sword being thrust into his chest.

He drifted into the arms of death.

By Lavinia Bousfield
Changing Times in Mercia

Mercian chiefs and advisors looked on closely as the chosen warriors dug deeply into the earth. Aelfgar and Aelhean, two brothers, had forged their allegiance to King Offa. Aelfgar the eldest brother struck his axe relentlessly into the hard ground. His powerful back steamed and sweat fell from his face with each strike of the axe. The smell of the loose soil he likened to death.

Offa of Mercia was a Christian king; he was the most powerful and successful of all the Mercian kings. He ordered the treasures of Mercia, gold, silver, precious stones and battle finery, the spoils of many battlefields to be buried on a hill. He chose a defensive position, away from the watchful eyes of the neighbouring kingdoms.

Aelfgar looked at the two pieces of gold he held in his hand. “A Christian cross,” he muttered, his hands shook. He took the symbol of Christianity and folded the arms covering the two tiny garnets that had been cut down to fit into the design.

Aelfgar then examined the horse (also known as ‘the sea horse’). He admired the beautiful
delicate patterned design revealing the high level of skills of individual craftsmen. The horse was no bigger than one inch in length. Needles had been heated to a certain temperature and used for soldering. The needles impregnated the gold and put on designs and patterns. Aelfgar had seen this craft being carried out in Mercia.

As Aelfgar toiled, his thoughts turned to Aebbe, sending his heartbeat racing. He needed a woman to do his bidding and decided that once the Mercian army defeated the looming enemy he would ask Aebbe to become his beloved wife. He than prayed to Woden, that Aebbe would accept him. Anglo-Saxon warriors were a fierce, superstitious race and many of them revered Woden, chief of the pagan gods.

A light breeze wafted through the air as Aebbe arrived at the lavish hall. She placed her cloak on a chair and smoothed down her peplos. She straightened her precious headband, a present that Aelfgar have given to her on his return from battle.

Aebbe lived in Mercia all of her fourteen years. She was the head baker in the kingdom. The chiefs had instructed her to prepare a banquet
and bake a batch of her famous bread as a gift to King Offa.

Whilst baking bread she dreamed of Aelfgar. Suddenly she felt ill, the smell of the bread made her heave. This kind of sickness was something she’d never experienced before. She had heard women in the kingdom talking about a strange sickness they’d experienced just before giving birth. Aebbe’s apothecary skills enabled her to mix a magic potion to protect her and her unborn from sickness. She drank it slowly and returned to her work.

King Offa entered the hall followed by his chiefs and counsellors. He took his seat at the head of the table. His warriors then followed him into the hall. The customary pungent stench of sweat was rife. The warriors sat around the long wooden table and ate ravenously. They shared stories of glorious battles, bygone days and riddles.

Overcome by heat and exhaustion Aebbe staggered toward the door and collapsed in a heap. Aelfgar who had been watching her ran to her aid. He bent down and touched her face gently. He then recited magic rhymes to protect her from evil spirits and sickness.
Story Hoard
Aebbe opened her eyes and smiled up Aelfgar, “Are you with child?” he asked. Aebbe nodded as Aelfgar picked her up and carried her to a small wooden bench near the exit of the hall, before returning to his table.

Aeheah sat drinking with his comrades, he glanced over at his brother who was talking to Aebbe. Aelfgar shouted to him, “Come here brother, I want you to be my witness, I want to marry this woman now.”

“I am your witness, brother,” Aeheah shouted.

Suddenly a sound and movement from the doors took their attention.

Aeheah immediately drew his sword. “The enemy is here,” he shouted, as he ran to protect King Offa. He stood in front of his beloved king who was instantly surrounded by his warriors. Immediately the hall was filled with their Welsh enemy, lashing out with swords and spears, screaming and chanting.

Aelfgar stood beside Aebbe, he knew they were outnumbered and neither side would be taking prisoners.
The battle had moved outside the hall where the number of Welsh warriors doubled. There were flashes of lightning and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air.

Aeheah defended his king mightily, slaying the enemy until King Offa fell, mortally wounded. Aelfgar saw him fall, he rapidly moved to where his brother had been trying to protect the king. As he got closer he clearly saw the deadly stroke of the sword that killed his brother.

Aelfgar knew the Saxon warriors were no longer able to bear the attack of their enemy. He glanced over to where he and Aebbe had been sitting. The beautiful peasant girl lay on the wooden bench with blood running from her throat.

Aelfgar felt thunder in his veins and lashed out warlike and victorious, only to be overcome and slain. The Welsh soldiers had wiped out the entire Mercian entourage.

By Ann Cullen
A Dream

I can tell that once there was a field where I looked from my place on the hill. I wondered what it was like. Did sheep graze there? Maybe this was a battlefield. Yes, I can imagine the Anglo-Saxons in battle so many years ago. There should have been something, an information board perhaps, to tell us what it was like. I close my eyes, I can hear screaming, clashing of swords, the grass is drenched in blood, the decapitated heads roll down the slope in the corner of the field. Why is this happening to me that I can see the past so clearly?

Time has passed. Now I can see the battle. In fact I am in the battle. My shoulder has been sliced open. I can hardly hold my sword. My enemy are coming toward me from both sides… now there is darkness…is this a dream?

My wife’s voice is loud.

‘Wake up, Henry! What are you sleeping here for? We are having a picnic.’

I tell her my dream.
‘You are watching too much TV late at night, Henry!’

I return to this place a week later on my own. My best friend wondered why when I asked if I could borrow his metal detector. Hitherto I had no interest in such a machine. I found the spot again quite easily, parking the car, wandering through the spinney. My heart is pounding.

Everything has changed. Grass is covering the spot. Something deep within me makes me stand quietly, in the far corner of the field on a mount in front of a huge old oak tree. I see a group of soldiers in the dress of the past. Are they a group of people play-acting the past? The wind changes and I can hear their voices clearly. My, they are good! They are actually speaking in the tongue of the Anglo-Saxons! Being a teacher of history and English, I can recognise the lilt in the voice and the way that one word goes into the next. My tutor at university was really good at producing the same sound. These men are real! Have I inadvertently travelled in a time capsule? My very being wants to go and talk to them and ask questions. But will they understand me? Or will they run a sword through me? I can almost see the headlines in the local paper!
Wait! What are they doing? Two solder have stripped the turf and two more are digging a hole. They all stop, making a circle around the hole. Chanting is going on. I feel they are talking to Woden or whatever god it is that they worship. By the hole I see a large sack shaped like a body. Is this a burial I see? But why here? Why so few mourners? There isn’t a village nearby, or a place of worship. The soldiers lift the body and place it in the hole. The soil covers it, then the turf. Everyone stamps across the spot. They are talking too fast for me to make out any sense. Turning to scan the field, looking towards me, as if they had been watched, they left the field marching.

I don’t know how long I stayed there rooted to the spot. I heard the birds singing and saw rabbits hop from one burrow to another. I could smell honeysuckle and dog-grasses and also other plant life. I have never been as aware of country smells before as I am today. Looking as far as the eye can see there are deer walking elegantly.

I try to move but I feel rooted to the spot. Eventually I do stand and start to walk towards the grave. I am still holding the metal detector when it starts to bleep. I jump, unaccustomed
to the sound. Today my nerves are on edge. Shall I take a look? I lift one piece of turf. The beeping gets louder. I look around in case the soldiers return. I am amazed at what I see in the sack. I fall back and I sit down. Then I take one small piece of gold and put it in my pocket and replace the turf. I am afraid of what happened here today. I walk slowly across the field through the spinney. My car is still there. I sit in it and find myself trembling.

It is dark when I get home.

‘You are late! Where have you been? You look so white!’

‘I don’t feel well. I think I will have an early night.’

As I lie in bed I think about my day. Shall I tell the friend I borrowed the metal detector from? I will think about it tomorrow.

I woke early and told my wife I was going to take the metal detector back. I know that I can’t mention what happened to anyone. While my wife was out shopping I buried my piece of gold in my garden under a rose bush.

Later this day there was a news flash: ‘Anglo-Saxon gold found in a field in Staffordshire’. I have the picture in my mind, exactly as I saw it
buried. I try to clear my mind of the image.
The next morning as I enter my classroom my twenty-five sixth-form students stand. The noise of scraping of chairs on the floor soon subsides. Then immediately I hear, ‘Sir, have you heard the news about the gold?’
‘Sir! The Staffordshire Hoard!’
‘Sir, it’s Anglo-Saxon’
‘Sir, what do you think about it?’
A sea of fresh young faces comes into focus. We are studying the Anglo-Saxon period in this term’s project. My students are looking at me to help them clarify what they have heard on the news report. I feel all the colour drain from my face as I pick up my marker to point to an area on the map on the board behind me. Suddenly I get the stabbing pain in my shoulder as I often do. But today it is different, as I simultaneously get a flashback to the scene when the sword sliced through my shoulder in the battlefield.

The questions and suggestions of how the hoard of gold was buried there were coming thick and fast. They are a bright bunch of students this year. How can I say I saw it being buried? They would all think that I was making a joke in bad taste, or had ‘flipped’. I think that is the word they would use.
I got through the day but the increasing talk about the hoard on the media was making my students unable to leave the subject alone.

On returning home at the end of that day my wife says, ‘You look tired, dear. Had a busy day? What do you think about the Staffordshire Hoard?’

She too only wanted to discuss it. She had been a history teacher before she gave up work to raise our children. I think of the piece of gold buried under the rose bush in the garden. Anglo-Saxon gold. It makes me feel afraid. I don’t want to go back in time again. But then a picture comes into my head of a time when I have passed over too.

I see the next owner of our home: ‘Darling, look what I have found under this old rose bush. It looks like gold. It’s a funny shape and has some red stones in it.’

His wife comes over and looks directly at it. ‘I expect some child had it for a Christmas present,’ she says. ‘No, I don’t think it’s gold. Throw it out dear.’

By Heather J Anderson
After the Monster

Frida looked down at the head pillowed on her lap.

‘Well, you are a handsome fellow, aren’t you? I’d enjoy keeping you warm on a cold night. Pity that monster knocked you about like this. Only you and me left in the village, maybe in the world. Are you going to live?’

She hears soft moans of unintelligible words.

‘Well, for a while at least it seems. I don’t know you. You’re not from here are you? I’d remember a good-looking man like you. I only found out how good-looking when I’d washed all the blood off.’

He mutters a few more unintelligible words.

‘What’s your name? Where are you from? What’s this sack for? It’s very heavy. I’ll just have a quick peep….Oh my! Is this what the monster was after? I’ve never seen so much gold! What did you say? Try again.’

‘Ahea. Messenger…King Penda.’

‘I’ve heard of him. King of all Mercia isn’t he? We don’t have no kings round here. Never seen one.’

‘Taking…hide it!’

‘Come on Ahea, this is no time to pass out.’
It’s been an hour since he stirred, but I’ve had a good look and there don’t seem to be anything serious. Fine muscles. Bet he’s strong and young so there’s hope. I might get him to thank me before I tell him about the sword.’

‘Sword?’

‘You sound feeble, but at least you spoke. Yes, a sword, I’ll tell you about it later. Don’t faint again. Where were you going with that sack? Come on, try!’

‘Taxes. From merchants in the town. Monster killed the guards. Take it and hide it. For the king to fight the monster.’

‘You sound as if you might be getting better. Do you have a wife?’

‘No.’

‘Good. Well, I knows ways to make a man feel better. Worn out, but better. Soon as he’s able. It’s been three Sundays since Guthrum and me. Well, never mind. Of course, King Penda’ll have to wait for his gold. Long time, I hope. Ahea is really handsome and I bet he’ll be strong and …’

‘Took you a long time, Ahea. How do you feel now?’

‘Better. You mentioned a sword?’

‘You’re in no state to handle a sword yet.'
Story Hoard

Even a magic sword. But if I make you feel better you can rest again and then I’ll tell you all about it. No, don’t knock my hand away, we’ve got to start a baby so there’ll be people in the village again one day.’

‘No! Tell me about the sword!’

‘Oh, well then, if it’ll calm you down. But I want to, you know, later. It’s a magic sword. All you have to do is hold it and it fights its own battles. It can’t be defeated. If I’d been here when the monster came through I could have beaten him myself. But I won’t tell you where it is until you…well, until you do. Puts me in charge, doesn’t it?’

‘No.’

‘What do you mean, “no”? I’ve saved your life and told you about the sword. Now you owe me a payment.’

‘I’ve never been interested in girls. Never been able to…’

By Alan Hill
She lifted her head and looked around her. She could see the other servants from the hall also busy in the garden, but there was no sign of Edgar. Where was he? The Thane had said that morning that all of his people should work in the garden today. He wanted the plot dug and cleared quickly and new vegetables planted. The gardener had grown most of them from seeds and it was time for them to be put outdoors.

She looked across the village green towards the hut where they sold mead and where the men often gathered. There was no one in sight. Surely Edgar had not gone to the back of the hut to take a drink? His love of mead had grown greater in the last few weeks. He said it was to help him deal with the misery of his life, but there was not a slave or bondsman amongst them who could not have claimed the same. She herself felt no pleasure in her work inside the hall and on days like this, she had to come outside and work with all the others at whatever the master cared to demand of them. She straightened her back painfully; she felt weary to her bones.

One of the other women called across to her, ‘Morgane, these two children of yours are
getting under my feet. Have them with you. I’ve got enough with my own brats.’

‘Blythe, Drew, come here to me. Stop bothering Edita. There’s work to do before our lord returns from his hunting. And he won’t be pleased if we’ve not finished it all.’ She muttered this last to herself. When was their lord ever pleased with any of them?

The children reluctantly came close to her. She looked at their dirty faces. These two little beings were her only pleasure in life. She had passed thirteen years on this earth when she had been reluctantly betrothed to Edgar and the children had followed shortly after, one after the other. Blythe was now five years old and Drew barely four. There had been two since, but neither had survived their first winter and, although she mourned them, life was probably easier with just two mouths to feed. She was relieved that for the last two years, Edgar had shown little interest in the so-called marriage bed. She knew he took his carnal pleasures elsewhere and was happy for him to do so.

However, she did want to see him now, working alongside everyone else. He was not much of a man in her eyes, but even he was not usually
so foolish as to ignore their lord's orders. She continued with the digging through the rest of the day, keeping an eye out for Edgar. When it was time to eat at midday, she brought out some bread and cheese from the clean cloth in which she had carried them. She and the children ate theirs and she kept some back for Edgar if he should join them. As the day wore on, the little ones continued to amuse themselves by playing in the dirt and Morgane worked hard, as she usually did.

When the garden had been dug and the planting completed, all the workers returned the tools to the gardener and Morgane saw her father come walking over from the smithy where he worked. ‘Father, have you seen Edgar?’ she called to him.

‘He has not been here all day. I haven’t seen him since the lord gave us our orders at daybreak. Do you know if he was given some other task to do?’

‘No other task, lass and I’ve not seen the wastrel, but I do have news of him. The hunting party has returned and young Alfred has just been to the smithy. When they went off this morning, Edgar went along with them.’
Morgane cursed and went closer to her father. ‘Why did the fool do that? He knew full well what our work was today. It is worse than having another child, Father. They at least stay close and mind me.’

‘Well, daughter, he travelled just a little way with them and then made off in another direction. He told Alfred that he had tired of this life of servitude and responsibility and was intending to find a life as a freeman. He’s always been a fool, but even he knows that our freedom does not come by running away like this.’

‘I cannot believe even he could be so stupid.’

She looked about them again. Perhaps the idiot was hiding in the trees and watching them. It was getting near to their mealtime and Edgar was always ready for his food. She sighed loudly. This was something she could well do without, especially after the hard day she had spent in the garden.

‘Are you looking for him, Morgane? I have already been a little way in to the woods. I went with Alfred just to see if he was about, but there was no sign of him.’
Story Hoard
‘What will happen to him and to us, his family, Father, if he does not return? I have little patience with him, but he is my man. How will I manage?’

Boden bent down to pick up his grandson. He and his wife spent a great deal of time with these children, especially since Morgane had lost the ones who had come after them. They helped their daughter when they could, as they knew Edgar was little support.

‘What will happen to him is, he’ll be caught and dragged back here to be punished if wild animals don’t finish him first.’

‘I wouldn’t want that to happen to him, Father.’

‘No, nor would I in truth. As for you and your children, you will continue to have a roof over your head. You are bound to our lord and that will suffice and you have me and your mother and brothers close by in our village. Don’t fret, daughter.’

Morgane turned from her father and looked at her children and smiled. She did not want them to be frightened by her father’s words. However, they seemed merely tired and happy. Maybe Edgar had been right. Now she could indeed see the possibility that life might not be
as miserable as hitherto. Without the burden of Edgar and his moodiness, she and the children could look forward. With this thought in her head, she turned again and looked towards the cobbler’s hut where Corey was standing and she smiled as he raised his hand to her and nodded his head and returned her smile.

‘Good day, Boden and to you, Morgane,’ he called across. Morgane lowered her eyes. She did not want her father to see her pleasure at Corey’s approach.

‘Aye, young man. It’s a fair day today. The lord should be pleased with the work done on the land. His mood is good, so I have been told. The hunt went well. All in the hall should eat well tonight and for days to come.’

‘Did the hunters catch any sight of marauders from other lands when they were out?’

‘Not that I am aware of,’ Boden replied. ‘I spoke with Alfred when he returned. It was he who told me it had been a good hunting day.’

‘Aye, I spoke to him too. It was after you and he had been to look for Edgar. I am sorry for your troubles, Morgane.’

‘Oh, it may not be a trouble. Time will decide that,’ she replied and smiled once more at the handsome cobbler. ‘The children and I are
going to my parents’ hut now. We may stay there tonight.’

She then lowered her eyes quickly. She had given away too much and she knew that her father had seen her smile. Her husband and father of her children had only been gone since morning.

‘Come, Morgane. Bring the children. Let us see if your mother has prepared any victuals for us. I bid you farewell, Corey.’

That evening Morgane and her children shared her parents’ meal. They ate a vegetable stew, which her mother had prepared; in fact, it had been stewing for days and each new day the woman had simply thrown in a few more vegetables. Meat was a luxury which they rarely had unless one of their sons had been poaching or, as today, part of a hunting party. They all sat together inside their simple hut and chatted about the day’s events. Soon, however, the children became sleepy and Morgane turned to her mother,

‘I must take the children home, Mother. I doubt that we will see Edgar this day. I wonder where he has gone with his stupid dreams.’

‘He’ll be back, you mark my words,’ her
mother replied. ‘He has not the sense to manage for long on his own.’

‘You speak the truth, Megan,’ Boden agreed, ‘and these are dangerous times. The hunting party may not have seen any attackers today, but they will not be far away. Our lord has many enemies and makes no secret of where his lands and possessions are. Someone will come some day to take it all and maybe wipe us out.’

‘Don’t speak that way, it frightens Morgane and the children.’

‘I wish I had no call to speak in this way, but I have seen enough battles and bloodshed to know that men commit dreadful deeds against one another. These followers of Christ speak fine words, but they too fight and kill to spread their message. Stay here tonight, daughter. The little ones are almost asleep already’

Morgane and the children did as her father suggested and they all slept the night with her parents.

This was how life continued for them. No news was heard of Edgar. The children asked after their father for a short while but, as he had never spent much time with them, they soon stopped.
Morgane found that her father’s words came true. With her work in the hall and her family’s support, she and the children managed well. In fact, for her, life was easier as she did not have to put up with Edgar’s laziness and whining.

As the weeks turned to months, Morgane regularly found Corey waiting for her as she walked back home from the hall after her work was done. As she had suspected, she enjoyed his company and the children also liked to have him around. Morgane often asked him to eat with them in the evening. She knew that her parents were aware of these arrangements and after Edgar had been gone for six months, she spoke to them.

She raised the subject with her mother first. ‘I know that you and Father are aware that Corey spends time with me and the children, Mother.’

‘That we are, Morgane. It is understandable that you should enjoy his company, but you must be careful of how people gossip.’

‘I don’t care about people. They did not care about me when I led a miserable life with Edgar,’ she spoke angrily. ‘I only care what you and Father and my brothers think. Has Father spoken of this to you?’
‘Of course he has. We have both spoken of it, as have the boys. Did you think we would have no thoughts on the matter? Do not speak so foolishly, girl’

‘Forgive me, Mother. I should not have spoken so sharply, but I am very fond of Corey as I believe he is of me.’

‘It is to be hoped he is, but you must let your father speak with him so that the matter can be dealt with properly. Edgar has been gone long enough now for us all to safely guess that he will not return.’

When Boden knew what had passed between his wife and daughter, he arranged a meeting with Corey. The young man was taken aback, but pleased to be given the opportunity to speak his mind. He reassured Boden that his intentions towards Morgane were honourable and, with Boden’s permission, he would like nothing more than to propose marriage to her. Permission was given and the wedding was soon arranged.

Morgane was delighted. She had watched Corey working at his craft in the village long before Edgar’s disappearance. She had had no hope then that she might one day become free to harness her life to his. Edgar had provided
that by abandoning her and their children. She could at least be grateful to him for that.

Such was the precariousness of their life, that one week after Boden had spoken to Corey, it was the eve of the wedding. The ceremony would be as simple as her first wedding, but their lord was to provide some foods for the party afterwards. He liked Morgane. She was a good worker, as were her parents and brothers and he had felt sorry for her when her first husband had abandoned her and her children. She deserved a little pleasure in life.

Morgane went to sleep in her own hut that night. Her mother slept with her to be her chaperone on this wedding eve as was their custom. During the night, both women were awakened by a scrabbling sound at the entrance to the hut. Fearful it might be a wild animal, they went to the door, but it was a man who pushed in past them.

‘Morgane, it is I, Edgar,’ he whispered in the dark. Both women felt weak from the shock and were unable to speak. It was Megan who recovered first.

‘What are you doing here and where have you been? You come back in the middle of the night like a thief.’
‘This is my home, old woman. Who are you to challenge me?’

Behind her mother, Morgane began to cry softly. Her hope of a new life for her and her children was gone. Her fool of a husband had returned. She would not now be able to wed Corey. She felt her temper rise within her and pummelled her fists against his chest. ‘Go away. Leave us as you did before. We do not want you back.’

‘I think you will when you hear what I have to say. Go and fetch your husband, mother-in-law. I will have need of him.’

Megan did as he bid, but more because she felt the need of her husband’s support than to do as she was told. The two of them returned within minutes. Once they were back, Edgar began the tale of where he had been for the previous half year.

After parting from the hunting party, he had wandered from one settlement to another in search of what he thought might be a better way of life. However, he had always been regarded with suspicion and on many nights he found himself sleeping in the wild with no food and very little shelter. It was on such a
night that he was found by a group of warriors returning to their village.

They treated him roughly but did him no real harm and took him along with them to their home. Once there, he had been fed and given a better cloak than his own. However, they were warriors and battle was what they planned. Edgar had to go along with them or face a certain death at their hands. The battle had been successful, but Edgar had become separated from the others.

‘When I looked around me, the dead were piled one on top of another. Limbs had been hacked from bodies and scattered all around. Birds were everywhere pecking the flesh from the corpses, but what they could not peck and rip were the swords and the armour and all the jewels, which decorated them. No other man was there. I gathered up as much as I could. It took most of that day. I buried all these spoils on a hill so that I might remember where they lay. I am rich; we are rich. We will live as free men, all of us. We only need to fetch the treasure. We must go today.’

Morgane and her parents had listened in silence, but now Boden broke it.
'You are the greatest fool on earth. Where did your companions go? Do you think they abandoned all the spoils of battle for you alone? They will follow you. They may be here already.'

Morgane knew in her heart that her father’s words were true. This would be their destiny. There would be no happy life with her children and Corey. Edgar had made certain of that with his selfish, greedy search for freedom. She must get her children to safety, but it was already too late.

The shouts of battle and massacre were all around. Edgar had brought destruction upon them. The village and the hall had no time to defend themselves; men, women and children were slaughtered and Edgar’s treasures would lay buried for centuries.

By Gaynor Macdonald
The sky was wolf grey and Erick shivering beneath one of the wagons. He told himself it was because he was cold. In reality he was frightened. He wondered why he had ever thought that leaving home was a good idea. He hadn’t come here to die on the battlefield.

That winter had been another hard one and his five boys had succumbed to an infectious winter cough. One after another they slipped from the world and he had been unable to do a thing to prevent it. His wife, Hilda, had smothered them in goose fat and burned all sorts of herbs in the room. They had spent their last coppers on a meat bone to make broth. It hadn’t helped.

Five coffins and the funeral costs had cost him his oxen. Without the ox he could not plough the land. Good neighbours came to help and, by spring, he had his crops sown, but he owed for the favours. The news came on the wind that an army was gathering in the west and battle was inevitable. Penda, their warrior chief, was raising his own forces. King Penda was known to be generous and the chance of a rich reward or a little plunder was in the offing. He might get a ring or a bit of gold from a helmet. All he needed was enough to buy another ox.
Hundreds joined Pender’s army. For a month or more it was fine weather and good food. They lived off the land, taking what they could from the villages and town they marched through. It all seemed like fun until they reached a field near the village of Hammerwich, in Staffordshire.

The weather had turned cold and the outlook too. The opposing army was bigger than anyone thought. There were as many of them as there were of Penda’s men. It would not be the easy battle they had expected.

As soon as the opposing armies sight each other, the battle commenced. Thousands fought and hundreds died. For half a day they hacked and stabbed: no one could tell who was winning. Erick found himself at the back of the press of men and fear claimed his soul. Feigning injury, he staggered back to the supply wagons. Wounded men lay amongst the dead with no one to tend them.

Erick staggered along the line of wagons, not knowing what he was doing. He threw back a covering, intending to hide in a wagon, and his eyes nearly popped out of his head. Before him was the open treasure chest of King Penda; more gold than he had ever dreamed of.
Dropping the cover behind him, he stood panting from exhaustion and shock. He was away from the mayhem, although he could still hear the din of men dying. There was no guards, no witnesses to his theft.

He filled a sack with as much as he could carry and took to his heels. From the top of the hill, hidden by some bushes, he looked down on the battle. It could go either way. Quickly he buried his stolen booty. It was enough to make him the richest man in his village, his town, and the county. He could become something; buy a position, become a freeman, maybe become a sheriff or a constable. So, why he went back for more, he did not know.

Erick did not hear the cheers as the enemy broke and ran from the field. The battle was won and he was sitting in the back of the wagon, sorting out the best bits, when the cover was thrown back. Penda’s men dragged him out and took from him the few trinkets that he held. They beat him and tied him beneath the wagon where he now awaited judgment.

Erick’s hand, the hand that had held just two small flakes of gold, was tied to the wagon and Penda himself chopped it off. Had they known what else he had stolen, it would have been his head.
Erick staggered back into the camp and, thinking he had received his wound in battle, some kindly man held a flaming torch to the stump and dipped it into a bucket of melted tar. He dare not wait for the rewards to be given out and, as soon as he could, he left for home.

The story he told was one of great heroism and, as soon as his injury was well healed, he would return to retrieve his buried fortune. The wound festered and within the week he had joined his sons, and his treasure, in the cold earth.

When the feudal lord asked Hilda how she intended to harvest without a husband or plough without an ox, she had no answer. Rather than let the land stand fallow for a year, the lord gave it to someone else. Hilda had no choice but to leave for the city.
Hilda’s Story

The End of a Hard Day

The carthorse stopped at the trough and refused to move until it had drunk its fill. Hilda Goody eased her back and splashed some of the water onto her face. This would be the last load of the day and she was aching in every joint. Dobbin looked up and whinnied.

“Ready for your grub, are you, my dear? Me too: but I’ve got another load of cobbles to lay before I can get my nosebag on.” She fetched the horse his food and he bowed his head to allow her to slip the loops over his ears. “There you go. I’ll just sit here and rest a while.”

She groaned as she sat on the edge of the trough. The air was sweet with autumn smells. The sun was low but still contained some warmth; it forced her eyes to close and before she knew, she was in a doze.

Hilda’s mind went back to the reason she had come to the city; her husband lost a hand fighting for the King in one of the many wars. He returned home with tales of a vast fortune he had taken from the wagons carrying the treasure of King Penda. War booty: pommels and hilt plates, cheek guards as big as a pot lid, all buried on an easily found hill. Their future
was assured, except that his wound festered and before he could recover the gold, the Grim Reaper claimed him as he had his children the year before.

He left Hilda alone and penniless. Their holding was too big for her to work and so was given to a younger family. Her only hope had been to find employment in the city.

Chester was growing rapidly. The river was being straightened and deepened. The port would soon be one of the most important on the coast. The trouble was that she was not the only one to see the potential and, at thirty-two, she was no longer young and beautiful. She had been once. Life as a farmer’s wife was hard and had taken a toll on her. She was however, as strong as an ox.

Plenty found work as serving wenches, barmaids, skivvies and kitchen hands. Hilda had found some work indoors, but she missed being under the sky. This job had seemed ideal. It was, originally, to lay cobblestones along the dock road. The dock was soon finished and the town’s guilds decided that it would be a good thing to cobble the main streets, too.

Six years on, and now most of the roads and even some of the back ways were cobbled. The work was hard and backbreaking, yet there were men, fresh from the last war, looking to
take her place. She had been told that morning that this was her last day of employment.

The sun sank, slowly pitching Hilda Goodwife into shadow. The foreman of the road layers came round the wagon and stood in front of her, annoyed that it would now be too dark to finish the day’s work. He shook her by the shoulder. At some time in the past few minutes, warmed by the fading sun, Hilda had stopped aching: her heart had stopped beating. Her body was loaded onto the wagon with the cobblestones and Dobbin was led away. In the morning she would be buried in an orchard near where the roadwork ended. It seemed fitting, somehow. Her last thought had been to hope for a good rest on her own piece of land, under the open sky.

By Geoffrey Skidmore
Story Hoard
Contributors
Heather J Anderson

Heather was born in 1930 on the South Coast, spending some of her childhood on a smallholding on the Isle of Wight and coming to Birmingham at the beginning of World War II. Two evacuations, then after school a ladies hairdresser for fifty-six years. In retirement she started painting and writing. Heather also makes cakes for her church coffee mornings.

Lavinia Bousfield

Lavinia is a keen writer. She was born, and still lives in, Birmingham where she worked until retirement. She loves sewing, drawing, painting, and writing poetry and novels. After her husband died, she joined a writing group and had her first book published in 2013. She became involved in an exhibition held at the Community Gallery, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery about the women of Birmingham. Oral recordings of her life, her book, and two oil paintings were exhibited. Lavinia was delighted to be asked to contribute and be involved in the writing of stories for Story Hoard.
Lorraine Boyce

Locally born, Lorraine taught here and in London for fifty years. Retired, she helps in a hospice shop and enjoys being with her six grandchildren. She appreciates the great opportunities offered by our museums, galleries, and libraries and considers it a privilege and a pleasure to contribute to this book.

Bob Burton

Bob realised that the past could be found in the soil when he came across many old bottles, clay pipes etc whilst gardening. With a metal detector he was delighted to find old coins, tokens and many interesting artefacts relating to social history. He speaks at many clubs and really enjoys sharing all his ‘treasures’.

Ann Cullen

Ann worked as a copytaker for the Birmingham Post & Mail for twenty years. She wrote many theatre, holiday reviews and articles. Ann has had two books published and has had
many short stories and poems published in anthologies. She studied creative writing at Birmingham University for two years. She is secretary to the Birmingham Irish Heritage Group.

Arina Cvetkova

Eighteen-year-old Arina is originally from Latvia and has lived in Birmingham for two years. She likes animals, going to the gym, cycling and travel. In the future she plans to visit every country that interests her.

Doreen Goodall

After a five year course at Bournville Art College Doreen worked for seventeen years full time and more than ten years freelance for Cadbury Design Studio. Now, amongst other things, she enjoys writing, painting, going out to lunch, weekends away and visiting stately homes (but not necessarily in that order).
Lisa Grace

Lisa was born in a small village in Derbyshire and is mother to one son, Tom, aged twenty. Her main passion is for Iron Age coins and she dedicates her hobby of metal detecting to the finding of recording of these rare pieces. She has also written articles on the subject for a well-known metal detecting magazine.

Alan Hill

Seventy-four and no longer pretty, but blissfully (most of the time) married. Ex office boy, ex company chairman and all points between. Since retiring he has never been so busy, but devoutly wishes he could play football again. He has infested over seven thousand pubs, and is willing to infest them all again if he can find a sponsor.

Lynda Lea

Lynda lives and works in Birmingham and her job involves representing staff in the workplace. She enjoys drama and has taken part in amateur dramatics. She loves reading,
Story Hoard

creative writing and has always had an interest in history. She has been very intrigued by the Staffordshire Hoard, and so she should be, as her surname is Anglo-Saxon.

Christina Liao

A writer, curator, thinker, and chocoholic. Originally from Taiwan, she came to the UK to study for an MA in Contemporary Curatorial Practice. Studying Philosophy and Chinese Literature in her undergraduate degree has given her the delicacy and passion for literature. She loves travelling and exploring every little difference, while sometimes she sinks into meditation silently.

Gaynor Macdonald

Gaynor Macdonald was born in Wales and has lived in Birmingham for forty years. She is married to John and has one daughter, Claire, and two granddaughters, Ellen and Lola. She joined the Kings Norton writing group after retiring from her position as Deputy Head Teacher in a large multicultural Birmingham school.
Rahel Mehabton

Rahel is sixteen years old and is studying English and Maths. She has three brothers and is originally from Eritrea. She spends her spare time with her friends, or visits the library. Her favourite food is pizza and salad.

Samson Mehabton

Samson came to England from Eritrea when he was fifteen. He is seventeen now and a student at Birmingham Metropolitan College four days a week. He likes playing football and reading history books. When he has free time he likes to listen to music. He is a very friendly person.

Yuting Ni

Yuting came to England from China two years ago. She is studying English at college. In her free time she likes to play badminton and walk in the park. Her favourite colours are black and white.
Yuwen Ni

Yuwen is seventeen-years-old and originally from China. She is a student at Birmingham Metropolitan College. Her hobbies are running and playing badminton, but her play is not very good. She likes to go shopping and play games with her brother in her free time.

Omer Omer

Omer is from Sudan. He is nineteen years old and loves to play and watch football. He spends his spare time reading the sports news. He is a very ambitious and hard working person, who likes to help people, and appreciates their help.

Fatemeh Rabiee

Prof. Fatemeh Rabiee is a Professor of Public Health Promotion within the Faculty of Health at Birmingham City University. Apart from being an academic and a practitioner with thirty years of experience of working both in developed and countries of economic transitions, she has established a number of community
organisations in Birmingham. Originally from Iran, she has also been instrumental in promoting emotional, mental and societal health and wellbeing of the population in her adopted city of Birmingham, working with a number of agencies in her spare time. She uses creative writing as therapy of mind and soul and enjoys writing whenever she is emotionally challenged!

Connor Robinson

Connor Robinson is a student at Wolverhampton University studying Politics and History. He has enjoyed working on this project, and is pleased to have met those involved.

Geoffrey Skidmore

Birmingham born and bred, Geoffrey worked, until recently, in light engineering. Redundancy, along with a lifelong interest in the past and reading fiction, led him to try his hand at writing historic novels — some of which are available on Kindle. At 61, he wishes he had started much, much earlier.
Adam Staples

Adam was born, and still lives, in Derbyshire. He has a keen interest in local history and has been a metal detectorist for twenty years. He has made many fascinating finds, including a hoard of sixty-two 3rd century Roman coins and a hoard of gold sovereigns, hidden away during the commencement of WWI. He works closely with the Portable Antiquities Scheme and also helps to identify and record other people’s finds on the UK Detector Finds Database.

Evan Wang

Evan is from China. He is seventeen years old and is studying for ESOL in English and Maths at Birmingham Metropolitan College. He has been in England for two years. His hobbies are playing games and listening to music, and he also loves going to the park to enjoy the fresh air.

Emma Whitney

Emma is almost twenty-five and dreams of being a sports journalist when she grows up.
Until then, she writes about anything and everything when she is not working, reading, or supporting Man City (naturally). Emma has always loved history, but found her fascination with the medieval past truly sparked by Ken Follett’s magnificent tome, *The Pillars of the Earth*. Being a small part of the Staffordshire Hoard celebrations has been a marvellous experience - a writer couldn’t wish for a more inspirational, exciting or intriguing subject matter - and Emma hopes you enjoy her short scribbling as much as she enjoyed writing it!
Thanks to
Story Hoard
Story Hoard

Barry Brignell Bookbinders
for their hand-crafting of this book

Kings Norton Writing Group
for all their support of the project

Kings Norton Library and Birmingham Adult
Education Service
for hosting many of the sessions and for their
support of the Kings Norton Writing Group

Elitian Ltd for design layout and printing

Timeline Metal Detecting Club
for publicising the project on their website

North Staffs Metal Detecting Club
for their support of the project

Mick Sadler of Birmingham Metropolitan College

Kathy Shingler of The Potteries Museum & Art
Gallery for the special tour of the Hoard

Very special thanks to Heather Anderson
and Doreen Goodall for the page borders,
‘illuminated’ graphics and illustrations

And finally, thanks to Helen Cross for inspiring
the participants to such great writing.
A note on publication and copyright:
Story Hoard is published by Birmingham Museums Trust on the occasion of the opening of the Staffordshire Hoard Gallery October 2014.

© 2014 the project participants and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery
Story Hoard