

A personal selection of Wessex, British Isles and world history.

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THE MILLENNIALS

A recent 'great read' is *The Year 1000* by Robert Lacey and Danny Danziger (Little, Brown & Co. 1999) which is a portrait of England a thousand years ago. Here are some extracts that caught my eye:



We have talked in previous editions about the ink used to write on parchment that was a mixture of oak gall, vinegar, iron salts and gum arabic. 'Encaustum was what they called ink in the year 1000, from the Latin *caustere* to bite'. On animal skin the effect was similar to tattooing.

It was 'the Venerable Bede (left) who popularised the use of the Anno Domini system of dating through his famous work *De Temporum Ratione* On the Reckoning of Time.'

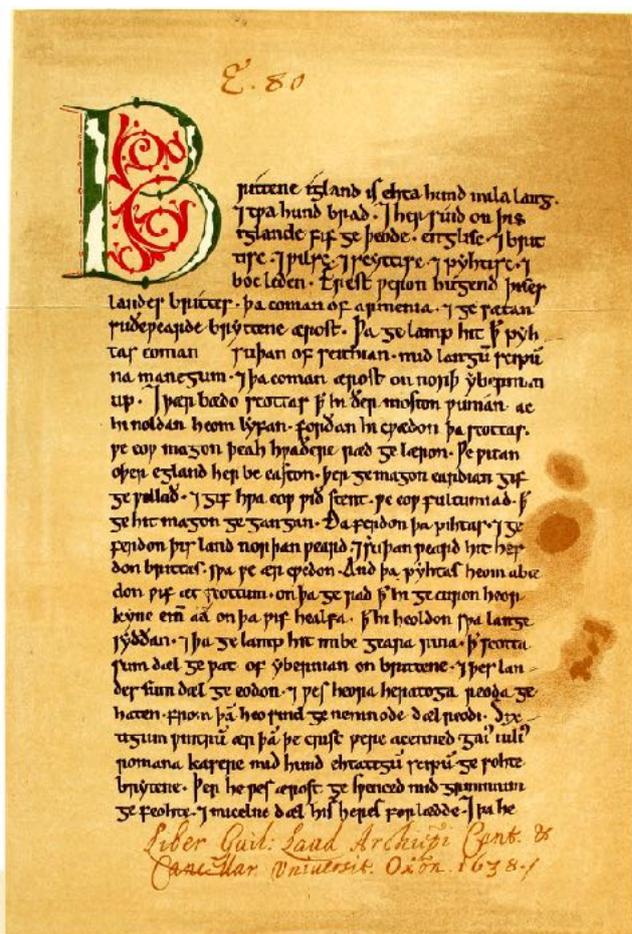


'The saints had lived real lives. They had measured their principles fearlessly against adversity - and many had lived quite recently, since there was no formal process of canonisation as there is today.'

'Between 450 and 600 the Anglo-Saxons took over most of the area which corresponds to modern England, and they referred to the dispossessed Britons as *wealisc* meaning foreign - from which we get the word Welsh. To the dispossessed Celts, the germanic invaders were all Saxons - from which comes the Scottish word Sassenach.'



The only monarch ever to be given the title The Great was of course Alfred. 'the greatest achievement of his reign was the creation of the first history of England in the english language, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*¹. By the year 1000 the Chronicle had been running just over a century,



the work of monks in monasteries as far apart as Canterbury, Winchester, Worcester and Peterborough' (first page of their work shown right).

'King Edgar, Alfred's great-grandson, was anointed in Bath in a solemn coronation using a liturgy that remains the basis of English coronations to this day.'

In the year 978 AD the Chronicle recorded a tragicomic accident in Wiltshire, where the royal council, almost to a man, fell through the floor of a newly constructed royal manor house at Calne, with the loss of several lives.

Ethelred the Unready (ill advised) 'laboured to integrate the prosperous realm he had inherited. The division of England into shires was the most enduring royal achievement of the tenth and eleventh centuries.'

'Most of the county towns of modern England originated in the tenth century. Roughly 10 percent of England's population was living in towns by 1000, which meant that the country's farming methods had developed the efficiency to produce a 10 percent surplus - while the town dwellers were generating sufficient profit to purchase the foodstuffs and other supplies they needed.'

July was known as the *hungry gap* when many poor people starved. 'People were light-headed through lack of solid food, and modern chemistry has shown how the ergot that flowered on rye as it grew mouldy was a source of lysergic acid - LSD, the cult drug of the 1960s.'

The Benedictine rule involved a good deal of silence which the monks got around by developing a sign language. The Canterbury monks even produced a manual of 127 signs, the *Monasteriales Indicia*. 'So you would like a little wine? "then make with your two fingers as if you were undoing the tap of a cask". Pass the butter? "Stroke with three fingers on the inside of your hand." Bede's copy right³.



'The Normans' Domesday survey of 1086 listed no less than thirty-eight vineyards in England, with Ely marking the most northerly spot, seventy miles northeast of London. It was a warmer world. Archaeological evidence indicates that the years 950 to 1300 were marked by noticeably warmer temperatures than we experience today, even in the age of *global warming*.

Meteorologists describe this medieval warm epoch as the *Little Optimum*, and they cite it as the explanation of such phenomena as the Viking explosion into Russia, France, Iceland and the northwest Atlantic.'



'Canute's decision to run his North Sea empire from England, and not from Scandinavia, was a tribute to the cultural and political status that the country had achieved by the beginning of the eleventh century, but it was also a tribute to England's religion. In the battle between paganism and Christianity, Christianity had come out on top, and in quite a rush.'

'...it made it your duty as a loyal member of your community to turn in anyone who was not behaving himself - Guardian Angels meet Neighbourhood Watch. This

oath, later known as *frank pledge* was part of tenth-century England's increasingly organised system of government, by which the shires were subdivided into *hundreds* - groupings of a hundred households, more or less. These hundreds were subdivided in turn into the smaller, local *frank pledge* groups of roughly ten or a dozen households, in which each member was held accountable for the good conduct of his fellows. The essence of the frank pledge system was that it transformed obeying the rules from a matter of impersonal obedience into personal loyalty, which was then extended up the ladder in a series of easily comprehensible steps to the principal lord, whose authority was endorsed by God. In the Dane-law of northeastern England, the hundreds were generally known as *wapentakes* (weapon taking).

BOUDICCA'S 'DISCIPLES'



The eldest son of a king did not succeed to the throne in the Anglo-Saxon period. All the king's sons were known as *aethlings* or throne-worthy and the royal family would select the most capable - King Alfred was a younger brother. Ethelred came to the throne at the age of 10 or 12 after his half-brother Edward was murdered at Corfe Castle in Dorset in 987 AD. It has been presumed that his mother *Aelfthryth* was responsible. She was one of a number of royal ladies that were really quite powerful. The Church did not want to interfere as she was very much their leading patron.

Ethelred's wife Emma, *Aelfgifu* in English (984 - 1052 AD), the sister of Duke Richard II of Normandy, was another strong-minded personality and in fact Canute put aside his own wife in order to marry her. The *Encomium Emmae Reginae*³ (above left) tells of her life in rather glowing terms. Perhaps the most dynamic royal matron though was *Aethelflaed* (868 to 918 AD) the daughter of Alfred who joined with her brother to defeat the Danes. She was known as *Lady of the Mercians* after ruling alone for seven years. As William of Malmesbury wrote: *She protected her own men and terrified aliens*. She completed ten fortified towns (*burhs*) in five years, completing her father's work. By 918 the Vikings in York offered her their allegiance without a fight. Above, statue of *Aethelflaed* at Tamworth.



THE POWER OF PROPAGANDA

Jill Kastner is an independent scholar and visiting fellow in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. She is the co-author of *A Measure Short of War: A Brief History of Great Power Subversion* (Oxford University Press, 2025)⁴: In mid-September 1883 the British steamer *Pembroke Castle*, traversing the North Sea, made an unscheduled stop in Denmark. Upon landing at Copenhagen the dignitaries on board, including British prime minister William Ewart Gladstone, received an invitation to dine with the Danish royal family at Fredensborg Palace, where Gladstone spent a convivial evening with the Danish king and his guest, Tsar Alexander III of Russia.

The unscheduled meeting between Britain's prime minister and the Russian emperor raised eyebrows in London and elicited a rebuke from Queen Victoria. But in Berlin it caused a



shockwave. Germany's *Iron Chancellor*, Otto von Bismarck, was deeply engaged in a long-running campaign to oust the British leader. The 19th century's greatest proponent of realpolitik was also one of its most wily meddlers in the affairs of his rivals. News that Gladstone had met the tsar stoked Bismarck's paranoia about an Anglo-Russian alliance, causing him to take ever more radical measures in his quest for a change of leadership in London.

It was not always so. In the first half of the 1870s Bismarck and Gladstone had been de facto allies, sharing common ground, especially over Bismarck's suppression of political Catholicism in Germany. Bismarck was grateful for Gladstone's support, and when the first Gladstone government fell in 1874 Bismarck wrote to him to express his regret and they continued to correspond thereafter.

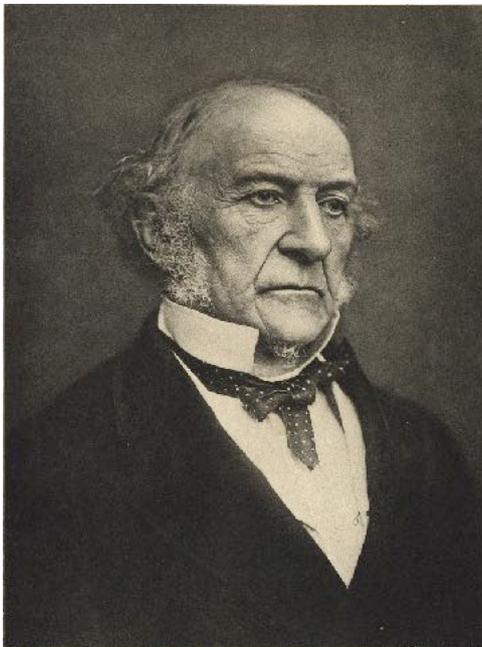
In 1876 outrage over Ottoman atrocities in Bulgaria prompted Gladstone's return to the political stage, but his overtures to Russia and his hostility towards the Habsburg Empire alienated Bismarck. Berlin greeted Gladstone's election victory in April 1880, according to historian James Stone (2010), as the 'political equivalent of a natural disaster'.

Bismarck launched a smear campaign to force Gladstone's downfall. Despatches went out to German embassies warning of the danger posed by Gladstone's 'republican' and 'revolutionary' regime. Despatches to St Petersburg stressed Gladstone's sympathy for pan-Slavic forces that would no doubt try one day to overthrow the tsar. To Vienna, Bismarck flagged Gladstone's support of the 'so-called principle of national self-determination', and warned that England was on the same path that had led to the French Revolution.

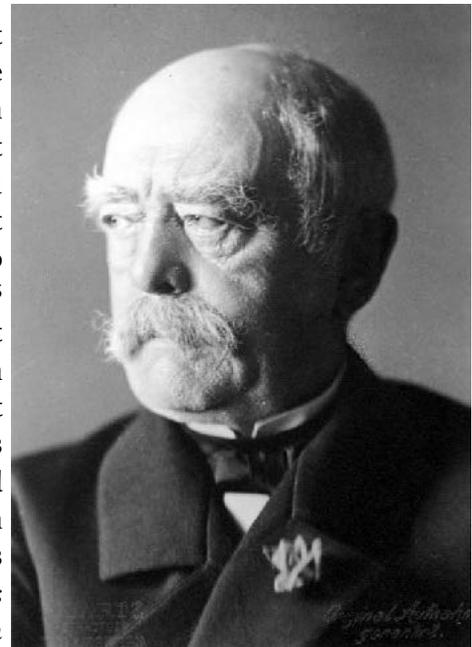
The chancellor began a public propaganda blitz, publishing reports highlighting the failings of the British Liberal government and distributing them to German newspapers. Those stories quickly appeared in Britain. The *London Daily News* had regular columns devoted to the news in European capitals and beyond. Correspondents in Berlin provided their British readers with daily updates on the content of the *North German Gazette*, the *Kölnische Gazette*, and the *Nationale Zeitung*, among others.

Bismarck then used his secret slush fund, known as the 'Reptile Fund', to purchase a news outlet in London, the *North German Correspondence*. He also maintained a close friendship with Edward Steinkopff, the owner of the *Pall Mall Gazette* who also reportedly had influence over the *St James Gazette*.

Such was the state of affairs when Gladstone made his unplanned visit to Copenhagen. Horrified by the prospect of a possible Anglo-Russian treaty, Bismarck ramped up his efforts by creating foreign policy traps to embarrass and delegitimise the prime minister. Bismarck had always strongly opposed colonial adventures, considering them an expensive waste of time. Yet, just months after the Copenhagen meeting, he suddenly embarked on a series of provocations and demands for German colonies.



Bismarck's son Herbert described the chancellor's goal with typical bluntness: 'That our policy will avail itself of this most favourable moment to squash Gladstone⁵ against the wall, so that he can yap no more.' In practice, this meant seeking out conflicts where Gladstone would have to choose between his principles and his practicality, so that *his prestige will vanish even more among the masses of*



the stupid English electorate. A campaign of foreign policy annoyances and embarrassments followed. When the Conservatives came to power in 1885 Bismarck⁶ abruptly abandoned his colonial designs with the remark: *Lord Salisbury's friendship is worth more to me than twenty colonies full of swampland.* This strongly suggests that his sudden colonial zeal had been designed to embarrass and weaken Gladstone.

Bismarck's campaign against Gladstone had a willing ally in Britain: the Tory Party. In July 1884 leading Conservative politician Randolph Churchill reached out to Herbert von Bismarck, then ambassador in London, to propose that Bismarck use his influence to scupper the upcoming London Conference on Egyptian affairs in order to secure the fall of the Gladstone government. Two weeks later Churchill contacted Bismarck again, begging anew for the chancellor to use his influence to force a change in Westminster.

By late 1884 German meddling was so blatant that the Liberals sought to spark a patriotic backlash by calling Bismarck out. On 26 December 1884 an anonymous article in the Liberal-affiliated *Daily News* revealed the chancellor's plan. It was a bold move, but not enough to save Gladstone. The prime minister was forced to resign in March 1885 after the defeat of his budget, but his reputation had already been shredded by the incessant onslaught of domestic and foreign policy failures, capped by the death of General Gordon in Khartoum in January and by the frenzy of press criticism whipped up at home and abroad, stoked by internal rivals and Bismarck's agents.

Bismarck had prevailed, but his campaign came at a cost. Though Bismarck had always stressed that his quarrel was with the Liberal government, not with the English people, his meddling struck a sour note that would linger long after the episode was forgotten.

HOCKTIDE⁷

The second Monday and Tuesday after Easter bear this name, probably from the German for imprisonment or debt. The word *Hock* meaning to pawn, is from the US but originated with Hocktide. This custom started in the Middle Ages and now is confined to the town of Hungerford in Berkshire.

Both men and women could be mock-imprisoned and *lifted* (released) only by paying a ransom which went to the parish funds. In church records it showed that *wyves* always gathered more Hock-money than the menfolk. As you can see from the Newbury News photo on page 6, the

men, armed with their *Tutti Poles* have morphed the payment into a kiss. The origin of this custom was supposed to have come from the binding or massacre of Danes by Englishwomen but it does not sound very likely. What is known that this is a Quarter Day when *Courts of Leet and Baron* were held and rents were due.



The Hungerford *Hocktide Court* elected the town's administrators for the succeeding year; and it still supervises considerable common land and valuable fishing rights on the River Kennet. These privileges were granted by John of Gaunt in 1364 as the town fell within the boundary of the vast Duchy of Lancaster estates. The Dukes of Lancaster are still presented with a red rose as *Quit Rent*.

GLOSSARY⁸

I think an explanation or two might help here.

Quarter Days are the 4 times a year when rents are payable - Lady Day 25 March, Midsummer Day 24 June, Michaelmas Day 29 September and Christmas Day 25 December.

Court Leet is a court of record granted by the crown.

Court Baron was a civil court dealing with matters concerning the duties and services relating to a Manor.

Quit Rent was a rent formerly paid to the Lord of the Manor by freeholders and copyholders which was an acquittal of all other services due. Nowadays a token or nominal rent.

Copyhold was a tenure of land less than freehold held by a copy made by the steward of a manor from its court roll.

Tutti Pole from Tutti Day, the Hungerford name for Hocktide.

Mercia literally kingdom of the border people. It was one of the principal kingdoms founded at the end of Sub-Roman Britain; the area was settled by Anglo-Saxons in an era called the Heptarchy. It was centred on the River Trent and its tributaries, in a region now known as the Midlands.

Heptarchy the seven kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon Britain, the others being: East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex and Wessex.

Ides in the Roman calendar, the halfway point of the month, normally the 13th but in some months the 15th.

Stir-up Sunday the last Sunday after Trinity (between 24 May and 27 June). The collect began *Stir up, we beseech thee oh Lord* which coincided with the ideal time to make Christmas puddings.

1. Translation by Rev. James Ingram (1823) and Dr J A Giles (1847) is published by Pantianos Classics and printed by Amazon. Bede's illustration from 12th century codex courtesy of Wikipedia, in the public domain.
2. The Venerable Bede's Finger Alphabet From The *Tegrimi Compactus* Manuscript. M.925. Fol 38r-39r 11th century. Canute illustration courtesy of Royal UK.
3. Emma receiving the Encomium, in *The Encomium of Queen Emma*, c. 1050, British Library MS 33241
4. Jill Kastner | Published in *History Today* Volume 75 Issue 4 April 2025. Cartoon Otto von Bismarck on a seesaw balancing global powers, by Joseph Ferdinand Keppler, 1886. Library of Congress. Public Domain.
5. William Ewart Gladstone (1809 - 1898). Photo by Samuel Alexander Walker in The Patrick Montgomery Collection. In the Public Domain.
6. Otto von Bismarck-Schonhausen (1871 - 1890). Photo Jacques Pilartz. Courtesy of German Federal Archives via Wikimedia Commons.
7. Taken from *The Customs and Ceremonies of Britain* by Charles Kightly (Thames and Hudson 1986).
8. Definitions from Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2005), Wikipedia and *The Book of What* by Rodney Dale (Index Books 2005).