Jot & Tittle

No.183

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

"The path of memory is neither straight or safe, and we travel down it at our risk."
Neil Gaiman, The Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy of Mr. Punch

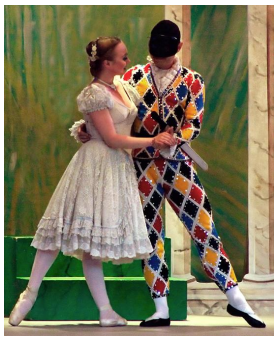
This month, in J&T 183, you can learn about Theatre (with a capital "T" as we look at the origins of the great comedies. We then shine a 'Venerable' light on some Dark Age manuscripts and finish with a look at some far-flung early evangelists.

OUT OF JOY COMES COMEDY[1]

Commedia dell'arte was an Italian theatrical form that flourished throughout Europe through the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. Outside Italy, the form had its greatest success in France, where it became the Comédie-Italienne. In England, elements from it were naturalised in the harlequinade, in pantomime and in the Punch-and-Judy show, a puppet play involving the hump-backed, crooked-nosed Commedia dell'arte character Pulcinella. The anarchic Mr Punch was taken as the mascot for the 1841 magazine *The London Charivari*. Unfortunately Punch ceased publication in 2002. The comical Hanswurst (Johnny Sausage), of German folklore, was a similar Commedia character.

Part of the characters' origins lie in the Greek and Roman theatre (mask above). Shakespeare is believed to have taken the Roman *Miles Gloriosus* (vain, lustful and stupid soldier) as the basis for Falstaff. He was also Leon Greene's character in the star-studded 1966 film *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum*.

There were rustic regional dialect farces in Italy during the Middle Ages. Professional companies then arose; these recruited unorganised strolling players, acrobats, street entertainers, and a few better-educated adventurers, and they experimented with forms suited to popular taste: vernacular dialects, plenty of comic action, and recognisable characters derived from the exaggeration or parody of regional or stock fictional types. It was the actors who gave the Commedia its impulse and character, relying on their wits and capacity to create atmosphere and convey character with little scenery or costume.



Harlequins

Harlequin (Arlecchino)was a stock astute servant character (think Figaro) who often carried a wooden *battle* or slapstick, used to signal a change of scenery. Nowadays better known as a Rugby Union Club. The story goes that in 1870 they were morphing from a local Hampstead club and needed a new name, so the dictionary was consulted. Their emblem is shown right. Harlequin's love interest was Columbine (Little Dove), originally a tricksy slave. Left, the couple being portrayed at the Mime Theatre in Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens.

My mentor during my wine apprenticeship was an Italian who, as I ran the cellars, called me *Capitano*. I now know that this was a vainglorious soldier character from the Commedia! Growing up I loved historical novels and especially those of the Anglo-Italian writer Rafael Sabatini. One of his main characters was the swashbuckling Scaramouche (Scaramuccia), named after yet another stock character. Right, J S Grimaldi, son of the famous Joseph Grimaldi playing Scaramouche. Originally, the character influenced the audience to obey him and was known for being adroit, supple and conceited but also exhibited traits of boasting and cowardice. He sometimes appears in Punch and Judy where Punch knocks his head off. This has given rise to a name for all puppets with extendable necks. I don't know about you but he does make me think of a modern political figure?

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LIGHT ON THE DARK AGES

I have wanted to try and understand this period for some time. Luckily I came across *In Search of the Dark Ages* by Michael Wood (BBC Books - Penguin 2005). It is a really accessible guide to the period and punctures a number of established views. To back it up I trawled the J&T Library and came up with the following:

Britain Begins by Professor Barry Cunliffe (Oxford University Press 2013) - The archaeology of the period.

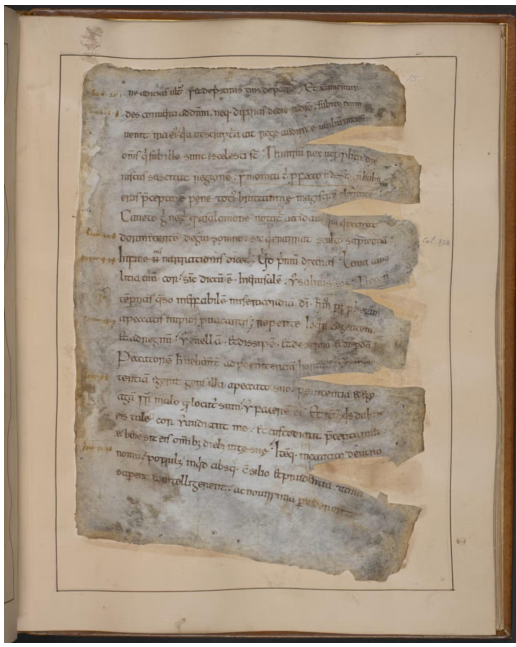
The Works of Gildas and Nennius [546 AD] translated by J A Giles (James Bohn 1861) - The only original source material for much of the Dark Ages.

The History of the Kings of Britain [1136 AD] by Geoffrey of Monmouth (Penguin Classics 1966) - Our origins in mythology.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle [890 AD] under the instruction of King Alfred translated by Rev. James Ingram 1823 and Dr J A Giles 1847 (Pantianos Classics 2016) - Our most important early manuscript apart from Domesday.

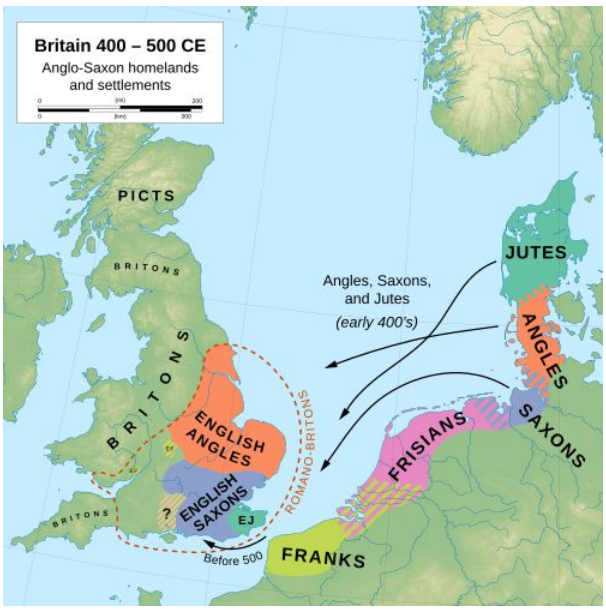
Ecclesiastical History of the English People [731 AD], The Venerable Bede (Penguin Classics 1990) - A classic but biased towards the Church of course.

The Age of Bede by D H Farmer (Penguin Classics1983) - Four early texts of the early Church.



Right: *Gildas' Ruin of Britain* (British Library).

The Dark Ages is a term that goes back to Petrach (1304 to 1374 AD) that Historians don't really like to use but nowadays prefer the Early Middle-Ages, referring to the 5th to the 10th century. There are a couple of early items of interest that I think are worth repeating. Firstly, the country did not descend into chaos the moment the Romans left in AD 410. The Welsh and Scots of course took the opportunity to mount raids but the towns were controlled by the Romano-British. They were the upper classes that had become Romanised and were determined to keep up standards. They managed to keep things going for around half a century. The difficulty was that the Romans employed mercenaries, brought in from Denmark and Germany. When the British society began to fragment, the various armed groups also employed mercenaries. So there was quite a substantial Anglo-Saxon presence before they started to come over on their own account.



The second item concerns the vacancy for an Archbishop of Canterbury. Amazingly, the Pope chose a man of African race, Hadrian the Libyan. Hadrian suggested that his older friend Theodore of Tarsus would be more appropriate. In the end they both came to Britain in AD 669, and what a team they made. Both highly intelligent and well educated, they were great teachers. Most of the classical teaching had been lost when the Vikings destroyed the monasteries and it was this gap, the pair made it their life's work to fill. This also applied to the copying of manuscripts.

One of Hadrian's teaching aids was the use of Latin riddles which he translated. These really took off in English culture and have been with us ever since. Apart from their school in Canterbury, they travelled extensively. Benedict Biscop, a Northumbrian aristocrat, spent a fortune buying up surviving texts from lost libraries in Italy where he met our intrepid pair and offered to guide them around England.

King Ecgfrith of Northumbria was encouraged by Abbot Hadrian and Archbishop Theodore to found monasteries at Wearmouth and Jarrow which of course became home to the Venerable Bede. Incidentally Venerable was an epithet to reflect his holiness. It was first utilised in connection with Bede in the 9th century, where he was grouped with others who were called Venerable at two ecclesiastical councils held at Aachen in 816 and 836. Later he was made a Doctor of the Church, the only English Doctor until Cardinal Newman.

As Alcuin of York put it a century later, the roots of English culture came from four great strands: the wisdom of Greece, Roman Latin culture, the Hebrew biblical tradition and *the light that came out of Africa*. Michael Wood's comment is that the pair *were even more influential perhaps - and this is saying something - than Erasmus and Colet* whose sixteenth-century educational project gave birth to the Tudor grammar school and the revolution in literacy in England*. As an aside, Theodore being from Syria, brought over the story of a new saint called George who was noted for killing a dragon.

*We will return to these two in a later edition. Another topic for later will be the flowering of the Anglo-Saxons under King Alfred and his amazing daughter Aethelflaed *The Lady of the Mercians* who ought to be as well-known as Boudicca.

Right Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* (British Library).

FOREIGN TRAVEL[2]

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of King Alfred records that in 883AD, *The same year led Sigelhelm and Athelstan took to Rome the alms which Alfred ordered thither, and also in India to St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew. Then they sat against the army at London; with the favour of God, they were very successful after the performance of their vows*.

So it would appear that Alfred the Great made a vow, the fulfilment of which gave him victory in battle over the Vikings. It must have been difficult enough travelling to Rome at that time but then to go on to India!!!! Cambridge historian and archaeologist Caitlin Green in History Today looks into the likelihood of this being a true story. William of Malmesbury (1095 - 1143) mentions the event and that Sigelhelm at least got to India: *Sigelhelm was sent across the seas, to further the almsgiving of the king and also to visit [the shrine of] St Thomas in India, successfully completing a journey that anyone nowadays might well regard with wonder. He brought back with him exotic gems of the kind abundant in that country; some can be seen still, set in objects ornamenting the church*.

The church was Sherborne Abbey as on his return, Sigelhelm was made Bishop of Sherborne. There is evidence that a Bishop of this name was signing charters in 925 to 932AD. Some believe that India is a misreading but in traditional accounts Thomas travelled to Kerala and Tamil Nadu where he started the Church of the East which stretched at least from Turkey to Sri Lanka.

The Feast of St Thomas on 3rd July is celebrated as Indian Christian's Day. Incidentally, his name means twin. Above: the San Thom Cathedral in India built over St Thomas' burial place. His relics (right) were believed to have been brought to Italy and are housed at the basilica of Ortona in Abruzzo. Both Bede and Pope Gregory The Great placed St Thomas' apostolate and martyrdom in India and later Marco Polo attested to his Indian shrine. Today there are in fact 28 million Christians in India. So it looks like the story could be true.

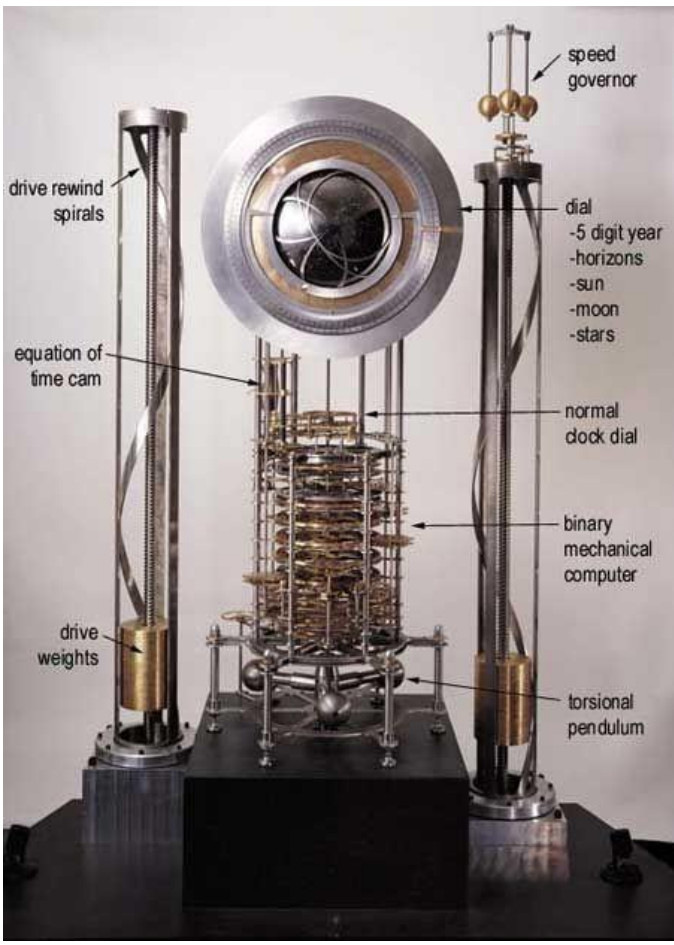
DID YOU KNOW?

Fishing around in the enormous amount of information enclosed in *Curiocity* by Henry Eliot & Matt Lloyd-Rose (Penguin Books 2018) I caught the following beauties:

On the death of Albert, Queen Victoria had all the City of London's railings painted black, which they still are. Many railings were cut down for the war effort but proved difficult to turn into tanks so were quietly dumped in the Thames! Some blocks of council flats are surrounded by low mesh railings, made out of stretchers used in the Blitz.

Virginia Woolf travelled to Paddington Station in a fake beard, turban and flowing robes in 1910. It was part of an elaborate hoax by her brother Adrian and his friends. They staged a fake visit by the Abyssinian Royal Family to inspect HMS Dreadnought. This included bogus telegrams to the Foreign Office and senior officers plus blagging a private train from London to Weymouth. It was a great success and did not come to light until one of the hoaxers leaked the story to the press.

In 1995 a flock of starlings landed on the minute hand of Big Ben, putting London time back by five minutes*. In the Science Museum is the Clockmaker's Collection of horological devices, the oldest in the world. Also there is the *Clock of the Long Now*, powered by falling weights and designed to be accurate for 10,000 years (right). A very large version - Bezos backed with a budget of $42 million - is under construction in a Nevada cave. If mankind becomes extinct the clock will still carry on, powered by changes in the temperature of the Earth's crust.



On 17th October 1814, the vats at the Horseshoe Brewery on Tottenham Court Road burst, sending a 1.5 million litre tidal wave of beer through the streets. It devastated surrounding slums killing at least eight people who were taken away on biers. (*Apologies for that - Ed*).

At Jonathan's Coffee House in 1698, a broker named John Casting published a list of company share prices - the origin of today's FTSE 100.

Charles Henry Harrod, a grocer from Stepney, founded the store that bares his name to cater for crowds flocking to the Great Exhibition of 1851. His Latin motto translates as *Everything for Everyone Everywhere*. It is believed that Ronald Regan telephoned for a baby elephant to which the operator replied *Would that be African or Indian, sir?* Author AA Milne bought a present for his son Robin, a stuffed bear that became more famous than the shop.

*This is funny as Bird is Cockney slang for Time. I believe that the year was actually 1949.

Jockey: A man that deals in horses. A cheat. A trickish fellow. From *Jack* the diminutive of John, comes *Jackey*, or as the Scotch say it *Jockey*, used for any boy, and particularly for a boy that rides race-horses (Samuel Johnson 1755).

Mess: A party of four. At great dinners the company was usually arranged into fours. *Your mess of sons - 3 Henry VI.* (Alexander Dyce 1902).[4]

1. From Wikipedia and other sources. Quotation from Martin Short care of Backstage.
2. *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Alfred The Great (Pantianos Classics 2023). *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, William of Malmesbury (Legare Street Press 2022). St Thome church photo courtesy of Mamichaelraj, Creative Commons.
3. Relics photo courtesy of Lucadideo, Creative Commons.
4. *Altered English* by Jeffrey Kacirk (Pomegranate Europe Ltd. 2002).