Jot & Tittle

No.177

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

A very merry Christmas to all our readers. We would like to thank you for your support and interest over the last year. A year in which we brought in a new Editor, expanded to social media and switched format. We still have many stories to tell and more fascinating history to share with you. "God bless us, everyone!"

"To you, Baldrick, the renaissance was just something that happened to other people, wasn't it?"

Richard Curtis and Ben Elton. Blackadder II (1986)

CHRISTMAS SPIRIT[1]

Yule logs were once a general part of the Christmas scene. Yule is an ancient Germanic winter festival, celebrated as a pagan holiday of the winter solstice to honour the rebirth of the sun.

A log, oak in Scotland but more likely ash in England, was brought in (never bought) and lit with the remnant of last year's log. It should be left burning for at least twelve hours and was thought to help prevent house fires and lightning strikes. If it were to go out then bad luck would follow. I can remember seeing an old weaver's house in the Kentish Weald where the inglenook fireplace stretched to the outside wall where there was a small window. This we were told was to allow an entire tree to be burned, especially as a Yule Log.

In Devon and Somerset a bundle of green ash sticks tied with twisted bark binders was preferred. As the binders burst the company was entitled to a round of drinks. Sounds my sort of custom.

Although many churches ring their bells on Christmas Eve, All Saints Dewsbury in Yorkshire ring *The Devil's Knell*. About 10:00pm the tenor bell sounds as many strokes as there are years since Christ's Nativity. The last timed to coincide with the first chime of midnight when 'Jesus was born and Satan died'. As each year the Devil bounces back, another stroke must be added to his knell otherwise he will trouble the parish for the next twelve months. This medieval custom was revived in 1828. The bell by the way is known as *Black Tom of Soothill*, probably from a local landowner Sir Thomas Southill who paid for the bell in expiation of his sin, murdering a boy. According to legend the lad was thrown into a smith's furnace or a dam!

At Kirkwall in Orkney they play football on Christmas Day. It is somewhat akin to Shrove Tied football and the teams are made up of *Uppies* and *Doonies* very similar to Ashbourne's *Up'ards* and *Down'ards*. As I was born at the top of the town I must qualify as an Up'ard.

PLUS ÇA CHANGE

We live in a time of change and worry about what the future will hold as politics moves to the right and people become less tolerant. Well of course this has all happened before and we are taught history with an emphasis more on dramatic changes than continuity. Examples would be the Reformation and the Renaissance. There is no doubt that these events were life-changing but they are artificial constructs by historians. For the peasant at his plough, the goodwife in her kitchen and the blacksmith at his forge, would they have noticed such a dramatic change?

Averil Cameron in her academic work *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity AD 395 - 600* (Routledge 1993) looks at the effect of the collapse of the Roman Empire, the expansion of the Arab world and the tribal barbarian pressures from the east. She points out that modern anthropology sees societies become ever more complex until they reach a point of collapse. We have the advantage of knowing what happens next but this affects our perception of historical day to day life. At the grass roots, existence probably carried on much as before with people's allegiance to more stable local structures rather than the ever-changing national ones. This does not mean it was peaceful, as for many European peoples war was the norm. It is also worth remembering that the influence of the Romans did not stop overnight, indeed you could argue that it is still with us.

The Viking invasion of the eighth and ninth centuries is another example of oversimplification. You cannot imagine a line from London to Chester and say that everything north and east of this line was Viking. Place names are usually cited as the best way to tell where the Norsemen were in Control but there is not a proven correlation. For a start there was apparently a Scandinavian element in the original English settlement of the 5th to 7th centuries.

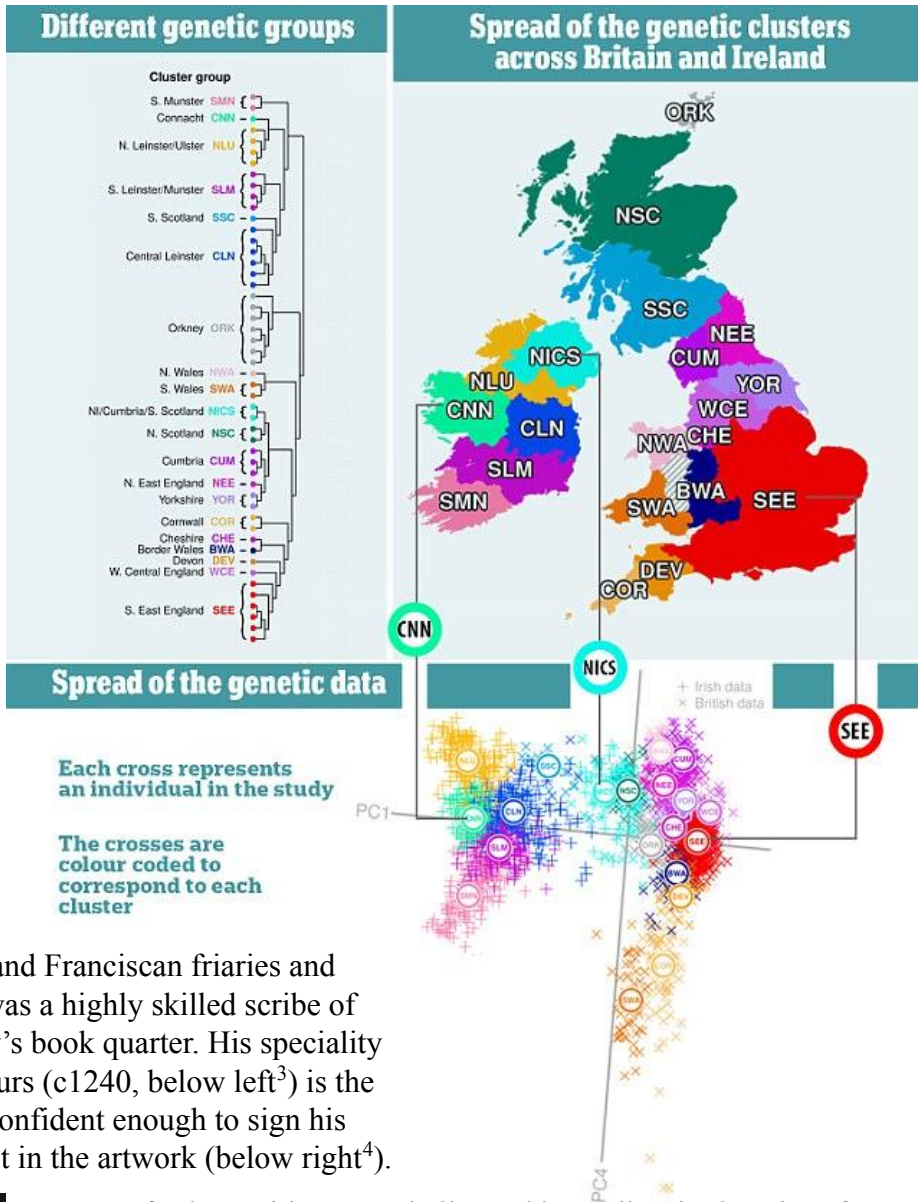
One way that historians have tried to assess Scandinavian influence is by looking at the names of moneyers on coins. At the time of Alfred they were all Anglo-Saxon. Fifty years later 15% of the names were Scandinavian. During the reign of Ethelred II (978 to 1016) the figure was 5% nationally but 75% in York, 50% in Lincoln, 25% in Chester and 7% in London. The invasion of 1066 was an extension of this as the Normans were themselves descended from Vikings[2]. Now we have the dimension of DNA (below) that shows the origin of today's population with its dominance by Anglo-Saxon and Celtic origins with clusters of Viking ancestry in the north of England.

In Spain, being under a Moslem government was not all bad as tolerance was part of their culture. Add in a new cuisine, scholarship and irrigation and things could be quite positive. Peter Frankopan in his *The Earth Transformed* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2023) is looking at world history and the effects of climate change.

He writes of this period: For most people, the retreat of geographic, socio-political and ecological frontiers did not necessarily equate with the catastrophe or even the decline that is often associated with the end of supposedly 'golden ages'.

To remain objective, perhaps we should study the *Baldricks* of history as much as the *Blackadders*.

SPEAKING VOLUMES



Medieval Oxford was known for its book trade stimulated by Dominican and Franciscan friaries and wealthy laymen. William de Brailes was a highly skilled scribe of the mid-13th century living in the city's book quarter. His speciality was illumination, and his Book of Hours (c1240, below left[3]) is the oldest English one we have. He was confident enough to sign his work and even include his self-portrait in the artwork (below right[4]).

Later Oxford's position was challenged by scribes in the City of London and the appearance of printed books. London particularly was buoyed up by the rising merchant class with money to spend.[5] In 1425 the London Guildhall Library was established, creating still more demand for quality scribes. With their work being reduced, the Oxford scribes expanded their field to encompass bookbinding and manuscript repair for the colleges.

The University employed a loan-chest system in which students and masters could pledge books and valuable objects in return for a financial loan. Accounts show that booksellers, printers and stationers were paid to value such items. Strangely, brewing was another activity that the book trade added to its portfolio. Printed items were largely imported from the great centres of Cologne, Rotterdam and Venice but eventually

there was enough business to warrant investment in presses. The first book was printed in 1478 but the early presses did not stay in business long. In 1636 King Charles I issued a warrant allowing the university to print books that led to a central printing facility for academics in 1668-9 and in 1675 they were given permission to print the King James Bible.

This early set-up eventually morphed into the Oxford University Press.[6] The OUP now centres its work on education, operating around the world, adding children's books in 1906 and a music department in 1923. 215,000 books in one year were distributed free by its partner BookAid. The storage shown (right) is for the words that didn't make it into their world-famous dictionary.[7] Oh, and the OUP is still governed by 15 academics appointed by the University Vice-chancellor. The Secretary to these *Delegates of the Press* is the de facto Chief Executive.

TRIVIA

Nelson's fleet was well maintained thanks to the extensive dockyards. In Portsmouth, steam engines drained deep docks, powered sawmills and drove the world's first assembly line of machine tools. The designer in 1803 was Marc Brunel, the father of Isambard Kingdom. Believe it or not these machines carried on working until 1982.[8]

Sir Walter Raleigh had his ups and downs, and he had the misfortune to live long enough to enter the Stuart period where he was seen as yesterday's man. Having disappointed James I he was beheaded in 1618. As was the custom at the time, his embalmed head was given to his wife, Bess. She carried it around in a red bag and would show it to anyone who called. She also spent the next thirty years trying to clear Walter's name. Her devotion seemed to have got him reinstated as a hero but in the process helped to undermine the Stuarts who fell afoul of the Puritans. As for the head, it was inherited by his son and finally buried with him in 1668. A direct descendant of Sir Walter Raleigh is working as a missionary in Bradford, and among the beliefs he preaches is not smoking tobacco![9]

Lamport Hall's (Kettering, Northamptonshire) claim to fame was that in 1843 Sir Charles Isham brought to England the first garden gnomes. They were made in Nuremberg and Charles used them to hold down his guests' place names at the dinner table. As they were rather off-putting he moved them to the garden. However, they looked rather forlorn in the open so, (another first) he imported bonsai trees from Japan to make them feel more at home[10].

No-one really knows the origin of Kibosh as in *that's put the kibosh on it!* There have been a number of explanations but I think I prefer that it refers to the number 18, perhaps from the Hebrew chai. A 19th century writer claimed that in an auction, if a bidder was gazumped by 18 pence he was said to have *put the kibosh* on his fellow bidders. In the 1950s it was used for an 18 month prison sentence. Alternatively, caboshed is an heraldic term for the emblem of an animal head, cut off so no neck appears[11].

Jeffrey Hudson (1619 - 1682) was only 18 inches tall at seven years old when he jumped out of a pie in full armour and saluted George Villiers' guests. These included Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria who adopted him as their court dwarf. He can be seen in this role in a painting by Anthony Van Dyck (right). His busy life included twice being captured by pirates, sold into slavery and fighting in the Civil War. He fought a duel on horseback to make him level with his opponent whom he shot dead. He was imprisoned as a Papist plotter in 1678 and died penniless not long after his release. He appears as a character in one of Sir Walter Scott's novels[12].

THE WHITE LION SAGA[13]

In 1619 two English privateers (private armed ships, authorised by the King to attack and capture enemy vessels) encountered the *Sao Joao Bautista*, a Portuguese slaver from Angola bound for Vera Cruz in Mexico. In this case, although the ships were English they were sailing under a Dutch *Letter of Marque*. The slaver was captured and the slaves divided between the two English ships. One, the White Lion, captained by a John Colyn Jope, sailed for the Virginia colony (founded in 1607) to sell his 24 captives.

The Captain met the Governor and it was arranged for the Africans to be sold as *indentured servants*. This was a contract in which the servant agreed to work for a number of years at a lowly rate but with board included. In theory at the end of the period they would be free. When slavery was abolished in 1833 the plantations resorted to shipping over (principally from India) poor people as indentured servants.

Back in Virgina, two of the indentured servants, Isabella and Anthony, married and had a child in 1624 called William Tucker after a plantation owner. William was the first African person born in English America. Oh and by the way, this was a year before the Pilgrim Fathers arrived. The Portuguese were the first and largest slave traders and carried on decades after 1833.

1. Taken from *The Customs and Ceremonies of Britain* by Charles kightly (Thames and Hudson 1986).
2. Courtesy of *The Tribes of Britain* by David Miles (Phoenix 2006). Coins: Eadred (946-955) Penny, two line type, Horizontal Rosettes, moneyer Regther. Courtesy of Baldwins. DNA map courtesy of Daily Mail.
3. Recreated Anglo-Saxon cottage.
4. Courtesy of the British Library
5. *Worldly Goods* by Professor Lisa Jardine, (Papermac 1997).
6. Taken from an article by Alison Ray, archivist of Lincoln College, published in History Today.
7. OUP photo courtesy of John Lawrence, published in The Telegraph.
8. *The Rest is History*, Holland & Sandbrook (Bloomsbury Publishing 2024).
9. *The Interesting Bits*, Justin Pollard (John Murray 2007)
10. *I Never Knew That About England*, Christopher Winn (Ebury Press 2005).
11. *POSH and other language myths*, Michael Quinion (Penguin Books 2004).
12. *Mr Hartston's Most Excellent Encyclopedia of Useless Information*, William Hartston (Metro Publishing 2006). Paintings: The Royal Collection and Samuel H. Kress Collection of the US National Gallery of Art.
13. From Wikipedia and various sources including the African American Registry. Model on display (Creative Commons).