



Hereward
wakes



Alex Beecroft

Hereward Wakes

© Alex Beecroft

"And the next lot -assorted Roman potsherds with a fragment of an extremely fine figured tile -I'll start the bidding at £10..."

There were six people in the fusty room, not counting the auctioneer, and all of them stared at Martin disapprovingly as he hurtled through the doors and stood panting in the aisle.

He wanted to scream at someone. British Rail, mostly, for leaving his train stuck in a siding at Aberystwyth for thirty minutes, or the taxi driver who had taken him on a sheep-clogged short cut on the way from the station. Didn't they know he was going to be late? He couldn't be late...

He took off his steamed-up glasses and tried to tiptoe to a seat. The dusty wooden floor boomed under each step. "Sorry." he said, generally.

"I've got the right place, haven't I?" he asked the man next to him, in a nervous whisper, "The Aberwyn collection?"

"No you have not." The man fixed him with a glare like hot coals, "You've not got the right place at all. Bloody foreigners! This is a Welsh collection, for the Welsh."

"Oh leave the boy alone, Ifor!" A woman, knitted hat pulled firmly down over grey curls, leaned forward. Her face reminded Martin of the smell of baking. "This is the Aberwyn collection, all right." She smiled, "What might you be..."

"Has the sword been sold?" Martin leapt in, rudely, and the woman's smile faltered. "I work at Soap Lake museum, Washington..." he explained by way of an apology, "I've come all the way over here just to get that sword. We're setting up an Anglo-Saxon exhibit. If we don't get it, it'll go to some private collector, and no-one will ever see it again...It's real important!"

"Is it so," the woman looked startled, "Gareth -that's the auctioneer -said it was a fake. Far too well preserved for the real thing, he said...That young man that bought it got a bargain then."

"It's been sold?!" Martin wailed, "Oh no!"

The flat air of the room whispered disapproval to him. He lowered his voice. "Do you know who bought it?"

"No we don't," said the fierce man, "Another blasted foreigner -English he was. Don't know him, don't want to."

Martin put his head in his hands and sighed with frustration.

"Well, that's true enough." said the woman kindly, and laid a calloused hand on his slumped shoulder, "But he came in with young Dafyd over there -maybe he might know."

"Young Dafyd" was a sandy haired, slight man in his mid forties, who blinked at Martin

sympathetically from behind round glasses.

"Dafyd?" Martin asked.

"Call me Dave."

Martin explained his quest: "I have to get that sword. It's an important artifact. The sword of Hereward. It belongs in a museum."

"Hereward?" a glow of enthusiasm made the little man's face shine like a cherub's, "As in Hereward the Wake? The Saxon freedom fighter? The Robin Hood of the Fens?"

At Martin's nod he frowned suddenly, and a very Celtic look went through his brown eyes -like the look of a druid who has seen to the heart of an important mystery.

"That would explain it," he said to himself quietly, and then explained, in apparent seriousness; "Came to buy it myself, didn't I? But I got the feeling...well, that it didn't like me. Hereward's sword wouldn't, would it? Because I'm Welsh, see? That's a very English sword, that is."

"You gave it up for a 'feeling'?" Martin couldn't imagine himself having any feeling which would prevent him seizing the prize.

But Dave nodded soberly, "When a thing like that -four foot of razor sharp steel designed to kill -doesn't like you, you take the hint."

"Do you know who bought it?" Martin's astonishment at this mysticism was a hindrance. He pushed it away. The trail wasn't cold just yet.

"I know him personally very well," said Dave, evenly, "I just don't know his name, or anything about him."

"Please!" Martin shook his head in bemusement. "Please, just tell me what you can."

"You see," Dave bobbed slightly, embarrassed, "I meet him quite often on the battlefield -but in the society he's known as Athelstan, I don't know any other name than that. Let's see..." he pondered a while as Martin wondered whether to believe his ears or not. "He used to be in Milite de Bec, but they split up. I wouldn't know now... He's in the North somewhere."

Martin pushed up his glasses with determination. "Tell me what he looks like," he said, "Maybe I can trace him."

"Tall, heavy," Dave answered obligingly. "Beer-gut, wears a biker jacket, has a long ponytail of ginger hair, laughs like a girl," and he smirked at some in-joke.

"But listen," he continued suddenly, "Why not just go up to Largs in Scotland? We have a big event up there in a couple of days. He's bound to be there."

"I will!" Martin exclaimed with renewed optimism, "Thank you, I will. And this time I'll rent a car!"

Among dragon-headed tents Anglo-Saxons were going about their daily lives. Servants chopped wood, be-wimpled wives gestured over their cauldrons with ladles that looked as heavy as maces, ladies sat chatting over their embroidery.

Martin gaped at it all in wonder. Three Saxon children raced past, chasing a weasel-pelt on a string, while scholarly delight stretched his mouth into an inane grin;

"They've even got the garment hooks right." he was thinking, "My God! Doesn't it bring it to life!"

While he stood and stared a woman carrying a tablet weave loom came up to him politely. "Can I help?"

"I'm looking for Athelstan," he said.

"The Heretic, the Black, or Athelstan of Croix?" she replied, relaxing into familiarity, like one mason recognizing another.

His spirits dropped, "I don't know...He has ginger hair."

"Ah," she grinned, "Athelstan the Black. He's in the tourney -over there."

A crowd of onlookers blocked Martin's view. The sound of fighting -brief flurries of violent tumult mixed with intervals of panting -battered him. Fear seized him by the throat "Lord! Don't let him be using the exhibit for this!" And he forced his way through to the double barrier of wooden fencing that protected the audience from the fighter's mistakes.

Athelstan, a maniacal giggle in five stones of armour, was fighting a little whirlwind of a man and coming off worst. When he had died -crashing through the inner barrier with a noise like an express train, landing in a shower of splinters inches away from the feet of fascinated children -Martin readied himself to seize his chance.

"Soon as he gets up," he said to himself. "Soon as he gets up, I'll ask him."

But the big man was not getting up. He was coiled like a foetus, shield clamped over his head. A splendidly robed bishop idly lifted the shield, straightened up quickly: "Medic!"

And Martin was pushed aside by two burly women with a medical bag, and then by running paramedics.

British roads were a nightmare! Everyone driving too fast on the wrong side. All those curves, and roundabouts! He arrived at the hospital in an adrenaline blackout. What he said to the woman at reception he didn't know. His hands were shaking hard enough she must have thought he was a shock victim. She sent him through, and there was his quarry, struggling to sit up on a trolley in the corridor, while a nurse approached him with a pair of wire-cutters.

"What pillock brought me in here?" Athelstan demanded of the universe at large, and then spotted Martin, hovering. "Here, mate, give me a hand up."

"Sir, we need to get you out of that armour." The nurse took it all in her stride, though her mouth quirked, as though trying to suppress a giggle. "You may have broken ribs, and concussion."

"You're not coming near me with those." The big man hauled himself upright, his weight pulling painfully on Martin's arm -Martin's shoulders were tight and sore with tension. "This mailshirt's new. Bloody paramedics trashed the last one, cutting me out of it at Rochester. You're not touching this one. I traded a bloody good sword for this."

"Not the sword!" Martin wailed, the sound of his distress too loud in the hospital's hush.

"I got it at an auction." Athelstan grimaced as he got to his feet, "Beautiful thing. Pattern welded, with the markings like snakes down the blade. Russet coloured, and the pommel in white horn and silver. So bloody authentic! You know they'd drilled a hole in the pommel and poured lead in -to balance it -and the hole even had the markings of a Saxon drill. Spoon-bit, you know. You can tell if you know what you're looking for."

He had fallen into an easy, lecturing tone; the tone of a man eager to discuss the exact workings of the eleventh century reciprocating drill. Martin interrupted the reverie. "It should look authentic. I have provenance to show it was the sword of Hereward. Nearly a thousand years old."

Athelstan collapsed back onto the stretcher, the newly restored colour fading from his face, leaving his skin almost transparent with shock. His expression made the overheated corridor seem suddenly cold.

"What is it?" Martin asked to get him speaking again, to take away the look of awe and fear which seemed so uncomfortable on the man's modern, confident face.

"Normally I'd have said; no way." Athelstan was whispering now, the stir of his breathing irregular with pain, making the chain-mail shiver slightly. "It was too perfect to be that old. It was even

sharp! But..."

"But?"

It was one of those moments when there seemed to be a bubble around him -an aura of silence while the whole world held its breath. Even the nurse, open mouthed at the sight of her patient escaping, couldn't get the protest out.

"It was creepy." said Athelstan, and frowned as if aware that he didn't have the skill to tell this well. His tone of voice carried all the meaning the childish words could not. "It had a gleam down it like it was watching me. When I swung it I could feel that it wanted to kill..."

"So you got rid of it?" This Old World superstition was quaint, but Martin was annoyed with himself for briefly letting it touch him. He was an archaeologist, in a world where that meant patient toil in dusty rooms. He was not Indiana Jones. He pushed up his glasses and fixed the Anglo-Saxon with a 'get real' stare.

"Traded it." said Athelstan, "With a live role-player. She was going to show it off at Springfest, and then hang it over her mantelpiece. I reckoned it couldn't do too much harm stuck on a wall."

"You know her address?"

"Of course not. But I can take you to Springfest. I persuaded the garrison not to go this year but, for the sword of Hereward, I reckon we'd change our minds."

"You're going to want it back now, aren't you?" Martin realized with dismay the trouble his big mouth had got him into.

But Athelstan shook his head gingerly. "No way. I'd be glad to see it in a case. Somewhere where no nutter can get hold of it. That sword likes its job too much."

The garrison's transport was a converted VW camper van. As they drove through the night Martin sat wedged between two hairy Vikings and a Saxon woman with a newly broken front tooth. Spears rattled in their tube over his head and army kit bags filled with axes slid heavily across the muddy floor.

The woman -very clearly one of the lads, and answering to the name of Wurzel breathed in deep when she heard Martin's story. "You do know that Springfest is in the Fens?" she said. "That's Hereward's land. All this being handed from person to person... It's like the sword is trying to get back to him." And there was a brief pause in the non-stop analysis of the day's fighting while the van filled up with fear.

Then Athelstan shouted back from the driver's seat, "Does anyone know where we're going? Who's got the map?" and the atmosphere dissolved. The "garrison" shrugged biker jackets on over their embroidered tunics and began to quiz him knowledgeably about Dark Ages history, interspersed with computer technobabble and intervals of lewd song. He thought that things could not get any more surreal, until the door opened on Springfest.

Among modern tents -bright with fluttering nylon -strode mystical warriors with ferociously spiked armour and plastic swords. Elves re-glued their ears in the portaloos while tusked monsters and wizards in sneakers relieved themselves in the nettles.

"We just come here to scare them," said Athelstan, looking out with a smile of satisfaction. "They're such girlies with their foam weapons! They go to pieces when they see the real thing."

"Well," Martin sighed -how long was it exactly since he'd last been with sane people? "Before you embark on your reign of terror, can you tell me what this woman looks like?"

"Like Xena, warrior princess," said Athelstan with relish.

"Yeah, and there'll be at least fifty of them," Wurzel put in pointedly, aware perhaps that she herself looked like a boy squire -a slightly effeminate one. "Bloody clones!"

An enquiry at the 'Orc's Head Tavern' -a Burger bar half-heartedly decorated with rubber masks -turned up some of Xena's friends.

"She's gone on the 'Tombs of Armillium' adventure, out on the marshes," said a weedy fellow in a long robe. In homage to Terry Pratchett he had 'Wizzard' embroidered on his pointy hat, but the straggling beard was all his own.

"Athelstan," Wurzel spoke up -spokesman for the group, "You take Martin down there. We want to go and hit someone. OK?"

"OK." The garrison had adapted to Springfest by putting on their watches. Athelstan looked at his now, "We'll see you back here at lunchtime."

Martin followed the big man through sparse woodlands. It was touching, the way they seemed to have adopted him. It -just -took the edge off the dismay about the sword. Leaving aside all the mystic stuff, which was bad enough, if Athelstan was right and the blade was still gleaming and sharp, how could it really be Hereward's sword?

Perhaps -his heart sank -perhaps it had been restored. There was a short period in Victorian London

when it had been in the hands of an enthusiast. And the Victorians were such meddlers! Suppose they'd added a new blade? Or what if the auctioneer was right. What if the whole thing was a fake? Wouldn't it mean he'd come halfway across the world, chased up and down this cold, mad island for nothing?

He stopped in a cheerless clearing, staring failure in the face. He couldn't bring a reproduction back in triumph to the museum. And all the money the journey had cost! The wasted research!

As he stood, struck down with defeat, a five-year-old child in a cloak and fangs burst out of the scrub and began to hit him around the legs with a latex mace. It seemed to sum up the entire trip.

He began to walk again only because he couldn't think of anything else to do. The tot chased after him shouting "You're dead, mister! Mister? You're dead!" until they reached the edge of the woods and his father dragged him away.

Coming out from the trees was like entering a different life. The marsh country lay under a blanket of ground mist, its tossing upper layer turned to gold by the morning sun. This was the very ground on which Hereward and his men had fought against the invaders of their country. Under the shifting green turf still lay the bones of those who had died.

At the end, in despair of victory, the invading Norman king had brought up a witch to curse Hereward's Saxon army; to make their weapons turn in their hands, their shield-companions desert them, leaving their backs open to the spear.

Here, where shapes were blurred by the mist -its touch cold on his face -Martin could for the first time understand how effective that piece of psychological warfare must have been. The empty land pointed out his own fleeting mortality effortlessly.

It hadn't worked though. Instead of wiping out the native resistance King William had been forced to sue for peace. He left Hereward's lands and people alone. But Hereward had compromised too, accepting the foreigner as his king. Martin had always thought less of him for that. A true hero, he thought, would have gone down fighting hopelessly, defiant to the end.

"There she is." Even Athelstan was speaking softly, as though he too could feel the breath of history, the reality from which all his pretence sprung.

The woman stood on a small ridge, looking down into the fog. She was bareheaded -the breeze making her fine hair fly and tugging at her cloak. She turned to look at them as they struggled up the hill, and her face was strange; as empty as the land. The sword was unsheathed in her hand, and where the sun hit it rainbows of sharpness ran down the edges.

It was an effort to ignore all of this, but Martin did it, "Please. Let me look at that sword. I've come a very long way to see it."

"No." Her voice was like her face; expressionless, "It doesn't want you. It wants its Lord."

"And it shall have him."

Now the mist rose -gray shot with gold -into walls and pillars of smoke. From a very far distance there was the sound of many men laughing and the thin, metallic notes of the Saxon harp.

"What!" Cold struck Martin to the heart. He was inside a feast-hall made of mist. He could no longer see the sky, only a ghost fire and the shapes of men, swirling, coming together and whirling apart again. "What's happening...?"

"Shut up! Look!" Athelstan was in this dream with him, but in his chain-mail and helmet Athelstan was little comfort. He looked so right here.

"Hal waes thu."

Martin turned to the voice and saw him; Hereward. The colour of life but poised as a statue. Motionless because he didn't breathe. His face, under greying hair and beard, was surprisingly gentle; the face of a man who has conquered even himself, and who no longer has anything to prove. He was waiting for a response.

This just isn't happening, part of Martin thought, but the rest of him was scrabbling for his Old English. "Other thu." he managed eventually, and the ghost smiled.

"Here is your sword, lord. Take it." Xena stepped forward and then knelt, holding the weapon up flat, like a portrait from a stained glass window. Her cloak drew apart, showing the skimpy costume and cold white flesh.

A flash of fury made the ghost's kingly face terrible. He took the hilt and energy seemed to pour from the blade into his arm until he glowed like sunlight in the wan hall.

"Who has done this to you, daughter?" he demanded, "Who has dishonoured you by dressing you like a whore? Show him to me and I will slay him."

"Ah...lord?" Athelstan looked dazed, awestruck, very happy and worried, all at the same time. It was quite an achievement. "Do you think that's a good idea?" he asked humbly, "The dead killing the living?"

Hereward lowered the sword, resting its tip on the top of his shoe -to keep it away from the damp ground. "No," he said slowly, "That would not be a good thing for either of us. But you...?"

"Athelstan."

"Athelstan!" the ghost's smile broadened, "A good name. Your blood is mixed, but you haven't forgotten us. There was some point in my fighting then.... Well, Athelstan, see that this lady's dishonour is avenged, and I will sleep peacefully."

The rafters of the hall began to dissolve -streamers of sky showing. Hereward looked over his shoulder at something Martin couldn't see. Something beautiful, he thought, given the warrior's expression.

He's going! The premonition struck him. He launched himself forward, "Wait! I need that sword!"

Even the far-off music stopped. There was a hint of irritation in the set of Hereward's mouth as he turned back. A hint was more than enough for Martin. "Please," he said abjectly, "There are folks in my country whose blood goes back to this place, whose history goes back to your people. They've got a right to know about their roots; as much right as Athelstan does. I just wanted to take something back for them; something they could remember you by."

"You shame me." said the ghost gently, "I thought you were a foreigner, but now I see you're not. You're kin. Yes, you may take something back. But not the sword."

"But..."

"Is widowmaker really what you wish to take into the future?" The ghost's eyes were the only part of him which were transparent. Martin could see through them to the blue of the sky beyond. Their gaze was powerful.

"Do you wish to take our feuds, our hatreds, our killing into the future? No." He turned, stretched out his hands, and something white coalesced there. When he turned back he held a massive drinking horn, two meters long, its mouth lipped in silver. A band of silver, rune scribed, twisted down to the finial where a dragon's head with garnet eyes showed its lethal array of teeth.

"In the end I made peace," said Hereward proudly. "Because peace is a greater achievement than war. The horn symbolizes peace, prosperity, feasting, happiness. I fought only to give those things to my people. I would give them to you, if I could, but at least take the symbol into the future with you. Let deathgiver stay in the ground with me."

Martin expected the gift to pass through his hands, insubstantial as a spectral horn should be, so the weight of it bowed him to his knees. When he got up there was nothing left of the Great-hall and its warrior lord except a fading ground mist -just a blue haze over the watery land.

He clutched the prize to himself -though it was icy cold -and looked out on the land, his mind astonished into silence. His companions stood equally dumbstruck beside him.

At the edge of the wood Athelstan's garrison had triumphed over a raiding party of live role players. They grinned at the sight of their leader and waved their blunt weapons in the air.

Over the next hill a party of orcs had ambushed a much larger army of kobalds. Excited screams rose in the air as a latex-tipped spear came flying past Martin's waist. He remembered the child's taunt "You're dead, mister!" It was bitter to think how much he had desperately wanted that sword.

No, he thought regretfully, to the memory of the great man he had just met. No, it's you who shame us. A thousand years, and we haven't yet learned what you learned in one lifetime.

