



"The ploughman feeds us all." The January page from the Julius Work Calendar, produced in the writing studio of Canterbury Cathedral, sometime around 1020 A.D.

THE YEAR 1000

WHAT LIFE WAS LIKE AT THE TURN

OF THE FIRST MILLENNIUM

An Englishman's World



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IF YOU WERE TO MEET AN ENGLISHMAN IN the year 1000, the first thing that would strike you would be how tall he was — very much the size of anyone alive today.³ It is generally believed that we are taller than our ancestors, and that is certainly true when we compare our stature to the size of more recent generations. Malnourished and overcrowded, the inhabitants of Georgian or Victorian England could not match our health or physique at the end of the twentieth century.

But the bones that have been excavated from the graves of people buried in England in the years around 1000 tell a tale of strong and healthy folk — the Anglo-Saxons who had occupied the greater part of the British Isles since the departure of the Romans. Nine out of ten of them lived in a green and unpolluted countryside on a simple, wholesome diet that grew sturdy limbs — and very healthy teeth. It was during the centuries that followed the first millennium that overpopulation and overcrowding started to affect the stature and well-being of western Europeans. Excavations of later medieval sites reveal bodies that are already smaller than those discovered from the years around 1000, and

archaeologists who have studied these centuries say that they can almost see the devastation of the Black Death looming in the evidence of the increasingly frail and unhealthy skeletal remains.⁴

Life was simple. People wore the simple, sack-like tunics with leggings that we laugh at in the Monty Python movies, though in colours that were rather less muddy. Despite the lack of sharp chemical dyes in the year 1000, natural vegetable colourings could produce a range of strong and cheerful hues, with bright reds, greens, and yellows. It was a world without buttons, which had yet to be invented. Clothes were still fastened with clasps and thongs.

Life was short. A boy of twelve was considered old enough to swear an oath of allegiance to the king, while girls got married in their early teens, often to men who were significantly older than they were. Most adults died in their forties, and fifty-year-olds were considered venerable indeed. No one "went out to work," but the evidence of arthritis in the bones excavated from Anglo-Saxon graves indicates that most people endured a lifetime of hard manual labour — and the Julius Work Calendar shows the different forms which that labour could take. Across the bottom of January's calendar page moves the ploughman, slicing open England's damp and often clay-ridden crust with the heavy iron blade that had been the making of the country's farming landscape.

"The ploughman feeds us all," declared Aelfric, the Wessex schoolmaster who, in the years 987 to 1002, taught his pupils by getting them to observe and analyse the different economic activities they could see around them. "The ploughman gives us bread and drink."⁵

It looks so slow and primitive to us, the heavy plough dragged by the oxen train. But compared to farming technologies in many other parts of the world at that time, the wheeled and iron-bladed plough of northwestern Europe was supercharged, enabling just two men to tear up a whole acre of soil with the help of the beasts which not only provided the "horsepower," but enriched the fields with their manure.

The wheeled plough was the foundation of life for English people living in the year 1000. It opened the soil to air and water, enabling soluble minerals to reach deep levels, while rooting out weeds and tossing them aside to wither in the open air. It was not a new invention. In the middle of the first century A.D., the Roman historian Pliny the Elder described some such device in use to the north of the Alps, and the evidence suggests that this powerful and handy machine was the crucial element in cultivating the land cleared from Europe's northwestern forests.⁶ One man to hold the plough, one to walk with the oxen, coaxing and singing and, when necessary, goading the animals forward with a stick: this drawing shows the furrows of freshly turned earth, the secret of how the soil had been tamed in the course of the previous centuries. It was the reason why, by the turn of the millennium, England was able to support a population of at least a million souls.

The calendar page on which the wheeled plough was sketched represented an equally developed and practical technology — the measuring of time. Today we take calendars for granted. Garages hand them out for nothing at Christmas. But the challenge of how to formulate a working system of dates had consumed the energies of the

brightest minds for centuries, with every culture and religion devising its own system of reckoning, and in Christendom confusion centred particularly on the timing of the Church's most important festival — Easter.

The early Christians debated it furiously. Christ was crucified as the Jews gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, so Easter's timing depended on the Jewish lunar calendar based on the $29\frac{1}{2}$ -day cycle from new moon to new moon. But planning a full year's sequence of church festivals meant that the lunar timetable had to be fitted into the $365\frac{1}{4}$ -day rotation of the seasons, based on the annual cycle of the sun — and whichever way you try to squeeze it, $29\frac{1}{2}$ into $365\frac{1}{4}$ does not go.

"Such was the confusion in those days," related the Venerable Bede, the great chronicler of the times, describing the calendar arguments in mid-seventh-century England, "that Easter was sometimes kept twice in one year, so that when the King had ended Lent and was keeping Easter, the Queen and her attendants were still fasting and keeping Palm Sunday."

The king was Oswy of Northumbria, the northernmost of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Oswy followed the calendar of the Irish-influenced monks of Lindisfarne, who first converted Northumbria, while his bride, Eanfled of Kent, stayed true to the Roman calculations with which she had been brought up in Canterbury. A learned synod was convened at Whitby on the Yorkshire coast to resolve this and several other conflicts of church practice, and it provoked deep ill-humour.

"Easter is observed by men of different nations and languages at one and the same time in Africa, Asia, Egypt,

Greece, and throughout the world," argued Canterbury's representative. "The only people who stupidly contend against the whole world are those Irishmen and their partners in obstinacy, the Picts and Britons, who inhabit only a portion of these, the two uppermost islands of the ocean."⁸

"It is strange that you call us stupid," retorted the Irish delegation, citing the Apostle John as their authority. They set out their own system of juggling the moon and sun cycles with all the disdainful superiority of the senior faith, since the Irish had been Christians long before the English. St. Patrick had established his church in Ireland a century and a half before Pope Gregory's envoy Augustine arrived in Canterbury to found the English church, and it had been missionaries from Ireland, not Kent, who had Christianised Scotland and the north of England.

But when the seaside convention concluded its arguments, it was Canterbury that won the day — a victory, in terms of church politics, for the centralising authority of the Pope in Rome, and a decision, in terms of the calendar, that opened the way for Bede, the monk from Tyneside who was both historical chronicler and master mathematician, to work out a system of dating that would settle the argument once and for all.

On the eve of the year 2000, the English have staked a proprietorial interest in the turning of the second millennium, thanks to Greenwich with its mean time and the zero line of longitude. Thanks to the Venerable Bede, they could claim a similar interest in the first. Not that we should look for Domes or any special millennial monuments in 1000 A.D. It was an anniversary which, by definition, could only mean something to people who dated their

history from the birth of Jesus, and even inside Christendom there were varying interpretations of that. But if any country worked to dates we would recognise today, it was England, and that was because of the Venerable Bede, who popularised the use of the Anno Domini system through his famous work *De Temporum Ratione*, "On the Reckoning of Time."

Composed in 725 A.D., *De Temporum Ratione* was based on the Easter calculations of the sixth-century Scythian scholar Dionysius Exiguus (Dennis the Little). In the course of compiling Easter tables for Pope John I, Dionysius had remarked, almost incidentally, how inappropriate it was for the Church to rely upon the pagan calendar of the Romans,⁹ particularly since its years dated back to the great persecutor of the Christians, the Emperor Diocletian. Would it not make more sense, Dionysius had suggested, to date the Christian era from the birth of our Saviour Himself, which could be designated as the year 1?

The scholar made two major errors at this point. The concept of zero had not yet entered Western mathematical thinking, which operated in Roman numerals, so Dionysius's Christian era missed out the twelve months of year 0 needed to get to the start of year 1. Still more seriously, the year that Dionysius selected for Christ's birth actually fell four years after the death of the notorious King Herod, who had been so memorably enraged by the birth in Bethlehem of a rival king of the Jews. The Gospel description of Christ's birth as occurring in the reign of Herod means that Jesus was probably born in 4 B.C., or even earlier (which also means that the second millennium of his birth should

actually have been celebrated in 1996 or 1997, and not in the year 2000).

Bede detected this error in Dionysius's proposed year 1 A.D., but evidently felt that the few years of inaccuracy mattered less than the dazzling concept of dating history according to the "Years of Grace," the era of Christ's reign on earth. When Bede composed his great *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in 731, he used the Anno Domini dating system, and when, at the end of the next century, the scribes of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* started their work of recording England's history year by year, it was Bede's system that they followed.

Confusion remained as to what day was the true beginning of the Christian year. Bede took it for granted that the year should begin with the birth of Christ himself, on December 25. But following that logic back through nine months of pregnancy, one arrived at March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation, or Lady Day, the festival celebrated by the church in commemoration of Mary's visitation from the Angel Gabriel, and the news that she was bearing the Christ child. For a Christian this represented the earliest manifestation of the Divine Presence on earth, and Lady Day was accordingly celebrated for centuries as the true beginning of the year. As late as the 1660s, Samuel Pepys reflected this enduring confusion in his *Diaries*, starting his reckoning of the years on Lady Day (March 25), but also noting the Roman consular date of January 1 as "New Year's Day."

All this complicated grappling with the imponderables of sun, moon, stars, and the fallible accretions of human

history is graphically displayed on the pages of the Julius Work Calendar, which takes the twelve Roman months with which we today are familiar, and overlays them with a filigree of Christian elaboration. The mysterious-looking columns of letters and numerals that run down the left-hand side of every page are part of the mechanism for calculating Easter and other festivals. The so-called Golden numbers indicate the occurrence of the new moon, while the Dominical letters show where Sundays will fall in any given year — since this calendar does not relate to one particular set of twelve months. It is a perpetual calendar, and its complicated codings are like the innards of a computer, baffling to the layman, but the route to knowledge for those who understand the code.

One inch in from the left of the page runs a solid column of Roman numerals setting out the day of the month according to the Romans' own daunting system of counting things backwards — from KL, the Kalends, or first day of the month, down through the Nones to the Ides, the turning point of the month, which fell on the thirteenth or fifteenth. But it is the writing to the right of the date that really matters, for here was listed the main purpose of the calendar, the names of the saints and religious festivals to be observed.

Good and evil were living companions to people in the year 1000. When someone was said to have the Devil in him, people took it quite literally. Jack Frost was not "weather" to people who had to survive without central heating through a damp medieval winter. He was mischief personified — a kinsman of the Devil, nipping noses and fingers, making the ground too hard to work. He was one of

a legion of little people, elves and trolls and fairies, who inhabited the fears and imaginings of early medieval folk.

But the Church had its own army of spirits, the saints who had lived their lives — and often lost their lives — for the sake of Jesus' teaching, and the principal purpose of the Julius Work Calendar was to provide a daily diary of encounters with those holy folk whose lives were an example and promise of how things could get better. This was the spiritual function of the calendar, and at a more basic level it provided a guide through a wonderfully varied collection of human characters whose lives, adventures, and personalities provided entertainment, as close as any medieval document could get to gossip.

Personal portraits did not really exist in the early Middle Ages. Even kings were only depicted as symbolic and idealised figures on their coins. But when it came to the lives of the saints, you had a chance to analyse their personalities, pondering the peculiarities of a character like Simeon Stylites, the fifth-century hermit who spent much of his life living naked on top of increasingly high pillars, or learning from the life of Mary of Egypt, the patron saint of fallen women. Mary was an Egyptian who left home at the age of twelve and went to live in fifth-century Alexandria, where she became a prostitute for seventeen years. Through curiosity she joined a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, paying for her passage by offering herself to the sailors. But on arriving at the holy city with her fellow pilgrims, she found it impossible to enter the church. She felt herself held back by an invisible force, and when she lifted her eyes to an image of the Virgin Mary, she heard a voice telling her to cross the river Jordan, where she would find rest. So, according to

legend, she bought three loaves and went to live in the desert, spending the rest of her life there living on dates and berries. When her clothes wore out, her hair grew long enough to cover her modesty, and she dedicated the rest of her life to prayer and contemplation. Mary featured frequently in medieval chronicles and church statues, identified by her long hair and by the three loaves that became her emblem.¹⁰

People identified with the personalities and quirks of saints, as today they feel they know soap opera stars. The hagiographies that recounted their stories were bland and stereotyped eulogies, usually written by loyal followers and friends. But human clues lurked in the details, and every saint's day of the month offered its own drama. In the monasteries, morning prayers were said to that day's holy figures. Prayer was a way of asking a saint to pay attention to your own particular worries. Singing was a beautiful way of saying, "Please listen." The God of the Middle Ages was a God who intervened actively in daily life. That was the message of the miracles executed by Jesus and continued by his saints. So one function of worship was to secure divine intervention on your own behalf.

After prime, the first service of the day after sunrise, the monks would repair to their chapterhouse — the monastery meeting room — where the lives of that day's saints would be read out, and one of the sermons preached in chapel might well take an incident from the life of that particular day's saint as the jumping-off point for some practical teaching.¹¹ January 5 offered the feast day of Simeon Stylites, the pillar-dwelling hermit, while other days featured Isidorus of Seville, who had proclaimed that there

should be a cathedral school in every diocese; St. Genevieve, who saved Paris from Attila the Hun, and whose candle was blown out by the devil when she went to pray at night; St. Lucien, who was imprisoned for his faith by the emperor Diocletian; St. Timothy, a companion of St. Paul who was stoned to death by the heathens; St. Secundinus, who wrote the earliest known Latin hymn in Ireland; and the hermit St. Paul of Thebes, who was said to have survived more than a hundred years of piety and austerity in the desert.

Each hero or heroine had their own lesson to teach. It could carry you through the day, a psychic talisman of encouragement, and the geography of the saints' adventures — from Antioch to Seville, then north to Paris and Ireland — provided a lesson in itself about the varied shape and character of a world which extended further than we might imagine. The Anglo-Saxons knew of three continents — Europe, Africa, and Asia — and they also knew about India. Late in the ninth century King Alfred sent money to help the Christian missionaries there.

England itself was a network of magical sites. The altar of every church contained the physical relics of at least one saint. The origin of the tradition whereby many modern churches are dedicated to a particular saint goes back to the founding principle of Roman church belief that a saint is intimately present wherever his or her relics might rest. Heaven was visualised as being something like the royal court. God sat there in judgement like the king, and paid most attention to those who could catch His ear. On earth it was the great warriors and magnates who enjoyed that access. In heaven it was the saints. Their holy lives and

suffering on earth had earned them direct transfer from earth to God's presence, without any waiting in purgatory, while their bodies, or the body parts reposing in the altar of their church, were believed to be still living. Many were the reports of saints' tombs being opened and evidences of life being discovered — growing hair or nails, or unperished limbs still containing blood — proof of the vitality and effectiveness of the Christian god. The churches whose saints proved particularly potent became centres of cults and pilgrimage.

When King Ethelbert of Kent received the first group of Christian priests who brought him greetings from the Pope in Rome in 597 A.D., he insisted on meeting them in the open air, so the wind would blow away any spells that they might try to cast upon him with their alien magic.¹² Four hundred years later the Christian magic had all England in its thrall, and the shrines of its saints provided the nation with its energy centres. Up in the north were the relics of the Venerable Bede, cherished since his death in 735 by the monks of Tyneside and Wear. Within fifty years of his death his cult as a saint was well established by local testimony that his relics had worked miraculous cures, and the potency of Bede's bones was such that many laid claim to them. In the mid-eleventh century they were transferred to Durham. Down in Wessex, Glastonbury claimed some relics of Bede to augment the abbey's reputation as one of the most holy spots in England. According to later legend, Jesus himself had walked in ancient times at Glastonbury "in England's pleasant pastures," and St. Joseph of Arimethea had travelled here to plant the famous Glastonbury

Thorn, which had been taken from the Crown of Christ, and which flowered every year at Christmas.¹³

At the heart of Wessex, in the great cathedral at Winchester, lay the body of St. Swithin, bishop of Winchester in the middle of the ninth century, and the object of a busy cult within a century of his death. According to Aelfric, the schoolteacher and great prose writer of his day, the sick flocked to Winchester in vast numbers to be cured by St. Swithin. "Within ten days," recorded Aelfric, "two hundred men were healed, and so many within twelve months, that no man could count them. The burial ground lay filled with crippled folk, so that one could not easily visit the cathedral."¹⁴

Aelfric was a teacher in the monastery school in Cerne Abbas, a few days' ride from Winchester, where he himself was educated, so it seems most likely that he was reporting from firsthand observation. Living and teaching for more than a dozen years in the shadow of the Cerne Abbas giant, the great pagan fertility god with rampant genitalia carved out of the chalk hillside above the village, it is not surprising that the ironic and quizzical Aelfric should have displayed a detached view of certain human claims to contact with the supernatural: "Some dreams are in truth from God, even as we read in books," he once wrote, "and some are from the Devil for some deceit, seeking how he may pervert the soul." But of the miracles in the crowded tenth-century cemetery of Winchester, Aelfric had no doubt: "All were so miraculously healed within a few days," he wrote, "that one could not find there five unsound men out of that great crowd."¹⁵

This was an age of faith. People believed as fervently in

the powers of saints' bones as many today believe that wheat bran or jogging or psychoanalysis can increase the sum of human happiness. 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. A beloved local abbot or abbess could become a saint in their locality within a few years of their death. Mass outpourings of grief like that which attended the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997 were the first step to sainthood in the year 1000. The next step was the testimony of the faithful to portents and miracles occurring.

You were not on your own. That was the comforting message of the little Julius Work Calendar with its twelve monthly recitations of saints' festivals. God was there to help, and so was a whole network of fellow human beings, from the distant past up to your own era. In the year 1000 the saints were a presence as vital and dynamic as any band of elves or demons. They were a living community to whom one prayed, and among whom one lived.

FEBRUARY



WELCOME TO ENGLA-LOND