

# THE PLOUGHMAN

"The ploughman feeds us all," declared Aelfric, the Westsex 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."<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.

Aelfric, the Cerne Abbas schoolteacher, got his pupils to practice their Latin by learning a dialogue in which the pupils played the parts of different farm labourers, describing their work to a master who cross-questioned them:

*Master* What do you say, ploughman? How do you carry out your work?

*"Ploughman"* Oh, I work very hard, dear lord. I go out at daybreak driving the oxen to the field, and yoke them to the plough; for fear of my lord, there is no winter so severe that I dare hide at home; but the oxen having been yoked and the share and coulter fastened to the plough, I must plough a full acre or more every day.

*Master* Have you any companion?

*"Ploughman"* I have a lad driving the oxen with a goad, who is now also hoarse because of the cold and shouting.

*Master* What else do you do in the day?

*"Ploughman"* I do more than that, certainly. I have to fill the oxen's bins with hay, and water them, and carry their muck outside.

*Master* Oh, oh! It's hard work.

*"Ploughman"* It's hard work, sir, because I am not free.

The ploughman's colloquy draws attention to the basic and unromantic reality of English life in the year 1000 — the reliance on slave labour. In 1066 the Normans were to bring to England their military-based arrangement of landholding known to generations of school children as the feudal system, with the hierarchy of serfs, villeins, and lords whose niceties are much argued over by historians. But prior to 1066, virtually all the documentary sources — wills, land deeds, and the literature of the day — clearly show that the basic underpinning of the rural economy in several parts of England was a class of workers who can only be described as slaves.

It is a commonplace that slavery made up the basis of life in the classical world, but it is sometimes assumed that slavery came to an end with the fall of Rome. In fact, the Germanic tribes who conquered Rome captured, kept, and traded in slaves as energetically as the Romans did — as indeed did the Arab conquerors of the Mediterranean. The purpose of war from the fifth to the tenth centuries was as much to capture bodies as it was to capture land, and the tribes of central Germany enjoyed particular success raiding their Slavic neighbours. If you purchased a bondservant in Europe in the centuries leading up to the year 1000, the chances were that he or she was a "Slav" — hence the word "slave."

In England, the Anglo-Saxons proved to be slavers on a par with their Germanic cousins. *Weallas*, or Welshman, was one of the Old English words for slave — which showed where the Anglo-Saxons got their slaves. When, in 1086 A.D., the Normans commissioned their Domesday survey of the land they had conquered, it showed that there were significantly more slaves in the west of England than in the east, reflecting the closeness of Wales, and also the fact that Bristol was a slave port, trading with the Viking merchants based in Ireland. According to contemporary chronicles, eleventh-century Dublin operated the largest slave market in western Europe.

But war was not the only source of slaves. Anglo-Saxon law codes cited "slavery" as the penalty for offences ranging from certain types of theft to incest. In this latter case, the male involved became a slave of the king, while the woman was consigned to the service of the local bishop.<sup>30</sup> Execution was evidently considered too severe a penalty for such an offence, while long-term imprisonment was not a practical possibility. Prisons did not develop until stone buildings and iron bars made them feasible, and since impoverished offenders had no money to pay fines, the only thing they could forfeit was their labour.

People also surrendered themselves into bondage at times of famine or distress, when they simply could not provide for their families any more. In later centuries there was the poorhouse or the bankruptcy law to help cope with such tragedies, but in the year 1000 the starving man had no other resort but to kneel before his lord or lady and place his head in their hands. No legal document was involved, and the new bondsman would be handed a bill-hook or ox-

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goad in token of his fresh start in servitude. It was a basic transaction — heads for food. The original old English meaning of lord was "loaf-giver," and Geatfleda, a lady of Northumbria, made the transaction explicit in the will she drew up in the 990s: "for the love of God and for the need of her soul, [Geatfleda] has given freedom to Eceard, the blacksmith, and Aelfstan and his wife and all their offspring, born and unborn, and Arcil and Cole and Egferth [and] Ealdhun's daughter, and all those people whose heads she took for their food in the evil days."<sup>31</sup>

Slavery still exists today in a few corners of the world, and from the security of our own freedom, we find the concept degrading and inhuman. But in the year 1000 very few people were free in the sense that we understand the word today. Almost everyone was beholden to someone more powerful than themselves, and the men and women who had surrendered themselves into bondage lived in conditions that were little different to those of any other member of the labouring classes. "Slave" is the only way to describe their servitude, but we should not envisage them manacled like a galley slave in ancient times, or living in segregated barracks like eighteenth-century slaves on the cotton plantations — or, indeed, like the workers in South African mines in our own times. Most bondsmen lived in what we would now describe as "tied" accommodation in a village with their families, and probably reared their own livestock as well. They were the men with the spades.

In the year 1000 people could not imagine themselves without a protector. You had a lord in heaven and you needed a lord on earth. The ploughman in Aelfric's *Colloquy* talked resentfully about his fear of his lord, and the fact that

he worked so hard because his master required it. But other medieval documents proposed faithful service to a good master as a considerable — even a life-f fulfilling — source of satisfaction, as it was for many servants right into our own times. It is a late twentieth-century innovation to scorn the concept of "service." In the year 1000 every English village had its local lord who provided an umbrella of protection for his neighbourhood, and that relationship involved a significant element of mutual respect. Anglo-Saxon lords never exercised, or attempted to claim, the notorious *droit de seigneur* whereby manorial law in some parts of Europe gave the local lord the right to bed the young brides of the village on their wedding night, and there were significant limits on their powers.

The great English churchman of the time was Wulfstan of York, the Billy Graham of the year 1000, whose fire-and-brimstone sermons had folk trembling. As chief executive of two major dioceses — Wulfstan was bishop of Worcester as well as archbishop of York — the great orator had to administer one of the largest sets of landholdings in England, and according to one theory he was the author of the *Rectitudines Singularum Personarum*,<sup>32</sup> a tract which tried to set down the rights and obligations that regulated lordship and servitude. In a connected document on the duties of the estate manager, or reeve,<sup>33</sup> the archbishop examined the mechanics of how a successful farm business worked, listing all the spades, shovels, rakes, hoes, ox-goads, buckets, barrels, flails, sieves, and other tools that were needed, right down to the last mousetrap.

Wulfstan described the various types of worker one might find living in the average Anglo-Saxon village, and

his account makes it clear that the ploughman and his assistant with the ox-goad were almost certainly bondsmen, looking after the team of oxen belonging to the local lord, who might be a bishop, the head of a monastery, or a nobleman. The ox-teams' primary task was to plough the lord's land, but it also ploughed the strips of the village's other inhabitants, who paid for this service with various sorts of rent in kind.

Wulfstan listed the dues and the perks of a centralised and authoritarian system which allowed space for free enterprise: if the ox-herd had his own cow, he could pasture it with his lord's oxen; it was the shepherd's perk to retain the use of twelve nights' dung at Christmas and also to keep the milk of his flock for the first seven days after the equinox; the cottager was someone who farmed at least five acres of land and who paid for this by working for his lord every Monday in the year, as well as for three days a week in August as the harvest approached. Nor was just turning up for a day good enough. The cottager would be expected to reap a whole acre of oats in the course of one August day, or half an acre of wheat — though he was allowed to go home with a sheaf for himself as a bonus.

Wulfstan sketched out the intricacies of give and take on any estate, emphasising how regulations should be flexible and responsive to varying local conditions. "One must learn the laws in a district lovingly," he wrote, "if one does not wish to lose good opinion on the estate," and he concluded his survey with a catalogue of the mechanics of celebration which brought everyone together at the key stages of the farming year — a harvest feast after reaping, a drinking feast for ploughing, a reward for successful mowing, a meal

at the haystack, a log from the wagon at wood carrying, a rick-cup at corn carrying," and many things which I cannot recount."<sup>34</sup>

Unrelenting though they were, the labours of the month involved moments of great fun and celebration in the year 1000, and as March drew to an end, the village looked forward to one of the greatest festivals of all — Easter.