

# VILLAGE LIFE

that would most strike a visitor from today — no planes overhead, no swish or rumble from traffic. Stop reading this book a minute. Can you hear something? Some machine turning? A waterpipe running? A distant radio or a pneumatic drill digging up the road? Of all the varieties of modern pollution, noise is the most insidious.

Yet in the year 1000 the hedgerows actually had a sound. You could hear baby birds chirping in their nests, and the only mechanical noise you would hear came from the wheezing of the blacksmith's bellows. In some villages you might have heard the bell in the church tower, or the creaking and clunking of the wooden cogs in one of the water-mills that had been constructed in the last 200 years, and if you lived near one of England's dozen or so cathedrals, you would have heard the heavy metal cascading of sound from the copper windpipes of one of the recently imported church organs. But that was all. As bees buzzed and wood pigeons cooed, you could listen to God's creation and take pleasure in its subtle variety.

The year 1000 was an empty world, with much more room to stretch out and breathe. With a total English population of little more than a million, there was just one person for every forty or fifty with whom we are surrounded today, and most people lived in small communities, a couple of dozen or so homes circling a village green or extending up and down a single, winding street — the archetypal little village or hamlet to which the modern suburban cul-de-sac pays nostalgic homage. The centuries leading up to 1000 A.D. were the years in which people picked out the crossroads, valley, or stream-crossing where they thought

**N**OWADAYS WE TALK ABOUT THE MAN OR woman in the street. In the year 1000 the average was represented by the man with the spade — or, in this month's calendar illustration, the man with the rake, the mattock, or pick-axe, and the apron full of seeds. The cultivator and his family were the backbone of the land.

The month of March heralded the arrival of spring. Winter was finally loosening its grip, for March was the month which contained the spring equinox. March 21 was the magical day blessed with exactly the same amount of light and dark in the course of twenty-four hours — and this is indicated by two sets of Roman numerals at the bottom of the calendar: NOX HOR XII (Night hours 12); HABET DIES HOR XII (The day has 12 hours). In January the calendar had listed sixteen hours of night and only eight of daylight, and for February the figures had been fourteen to ten. But from March 21 onwards the sun would annexe more and more of the night, and the cycle of cultivation could get seriously under way.

It was the quietness of life in a medieval English village

they could piece together a living. Villages built around a green may originally have been constructed in a circular pattern to provide protection for livestock against wolves or other marauders. By the end of the first millennium almost every modern English village existed and bore its modern name, and these names can tell us whether the identity of that village was primarily shaped by the Anglo-Saxons or the Danes.

Place names ending in *ham*, the Old English for "settlement," indicate an Anglo-Saxon origin — as in Durham, Clapham, or Sandringham. Other Anglo-Saxon endings include *ing* (as in Reading), *stowe* (as in Felixstowe), *stead* (as in Hampstead), and *ton* (as in Kingston). Viking settlements can be identified by the ending *by*, which originally meant a farm (as in Whitby, Derby, or Grimsby); and other Danish endings include *thorpe* (as in Scunthorpe), *toft*, meaning a plot of land (as in Lowestoft), and *scale*, meaning a temporary hut or shelter (as in Windscale).

Armed with these pedigrees, we can look at the names of villages along a stretch of marshy Lincolnshire coast to see how the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes rubbed shoulders. The Anglo-Saxons lived inland in settlements like Covenham and Alvingham. But less than five miles away there were Danes living in North Thoresby, or closer to the sea at Grainthorpe. And then there were places where the two heritages mingled. The town of Melton almost certainly started out as the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Middleton. But when the Vikings came along, they changed Middle to Meddle, and the succeeding years smoothed down Meddletoun to Melton.<sup>28</sup>

The village where he lived was the beginning and almost the end of the Englishman's world. He knew that he lived in Engla-land, and he probably knew the name of the king whose crude image was stamped on the coins that were starting to play quite a role in the village economy. He would have also made excursions to the tops of the nearest hills to gaze out on other villages which he might have visited, and he had almost certainly made his way to the nearest market town along one of the deep, sunken tracks that wound their way between the fields.

As he stood on the hilltop, he would not have seen significantly more woodland than we would today. It is frequently supposed that medieval England was clad in thick forests, but Neolithic Britons had started cutting down trees and growing crops as early as 5000 B.C., and the Romans were major land managers, laying down villas and farms, as well as their roads, across the countryside. Anglo-Saxon plough teams continued the process, so an Anglo-Saxon standing on the top of, say, Box Hill in Surrey in the year 1000 would have looked out on a pattern of vegetation that was little different from that surveyed by Jane Austen's Emma eight hundred years later.

That Anglo-Saxon would also have seen one or two of the bright, new stone parish churches that were to become the heart of English village life in the second millennium. England's earliest Christian missionaries were monks who went out from the cathedral abbeys to preach at the foot of the tall crosses that survive in the centre of a few ancient towns and villages today. The tall cross marked the point where the people of the village gathered to pray, but as the

church grew richer, congregations were able to build themselves houses of worship, first in wood and later in stone.

The Englishman's own home was certainly a wooden structure, based on a framework of sturdy beams stuck into the ground and fastened together with wooden pegs. This framework was then covered in planks or served as the basis for a heavy, basket-like weaving of willow or hazel branches that were covered in "cob" — a mixture of clay, straw, and cow dung that was used until quite recent times for the construction of cottages in Somerset and Devon. Roofs were thatched with straw or reeds, while windows were small gaps cut into the walls and covered with wattle shutters, since glass — the product of beechwood ash fired in a charcoal furnace with washed sand — was a precious, and probably an imported, commodity.<sup>29</sup>

Village communities provided reassuringly constant backdrops for a life. The average Anglo-Saxon could probably recognise every duck, chicken, and pig in his village and knew whom it belonged to — as he knew everything about his neighbours' lives. His social circle would not have filled three or four pages in a modern *Filofax*, and he would never have needed fresh leaves for updating, since the parents of his neighbours had been his parents' neighbours, and their children were destined to live their lives side-by-side with his. How else could life be? The closest modern parallel is with the restricted and repetitious circle of friends that surround the central families of radio and television soap-opera characters. In the year 1000, the same Christian names were often passed down traditionally inside families, but there were no surnames. There was not yet any need for them.

In the countryside around the villages, the fields were beginning to take on a shape that we would recognise, thanks to the labours of the ploughman with his powerful but cumbersome train of oxen. They cut the soil deep and long, but they were awkward to turn when the end of the furrow had been reached. So just as the village livestock grazed together on communal pasture, the fields created for arable cultivation were also organised on a community basis, with each unit of ploughland taking the form of a long and comparatively narrow strip.

**I**F 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

Once the harvest had been gathered in early medieval times, every farmer and householder had to work out the basic equation of survival through the winter. How long would the larder last, and which animals looked like consuming more fodder than their life expectancy could justify? September was the month when ailing and elderly livestock was turned into sausages and pies, and the pig was the crucial factor in this calculation. The cultivated harvest in the fields was matched by the woodland "mast" of beechnuts, acorns, chestnuts, and other fruits of the forest. Autumn was when the hogs were at their fattest.

The simplest things were so difficult to accomplish. It took enormous time and effort to manufacture just a single coin, or to turn on a hand lathe the wooden cups that would today be produced in vast quantities by a machine. Every basic artefact represented hours of skill and effort and ingenuity, in return for a very meagre material reward. Kings and eminent churchmen lived in relative comfort, but there were no large or exaggerated profit margins for anyone. For the vast majority of ordinary people life was a struggle in even the smallest respect. Imagine wearing scratchy underwear made of coarse, hand-woven wool, since there was no cotton. Only the wealthy could afford garments of linen — and that was woven to a texture that would be too itchy for many a modern skin. The poetry of the year 1000 celebrated the qualities of the hero, and just to survive on a day-to-day basis every man and woman had to be precisely that.

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.

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**P**LOUGHLAND, PASTURE, AND WOODLAND — in the year 1000 the forests were farmed like fields. Wood was the fuel of the times, and it was also the principal building material, the substance of choice for every sort of household implement and repair. Technically the first millennium fell in the Iron Age, but when it came to the texture of everyday life it was much more the Age of Wood.

"Which of you doesn't make use of my craft, when I make houses and various vessels and boats for you all?" asked the carpenter boastfully in Aelfric's *Colloquy*.<sup>57</sup>

The word *carpenter* is said to have come from the admiration which the Romans felt for the fine and sturdy two-wheeled cart developed by the Celtic woodworkers of ancient Britain — not dissimilar to the cart depicted in this month's calendar drawing. The Romans called it a "carpentum," and those who were skilled at making such carts — or who used the wood transported in them — became known as carpenters.<sup>58</sup>

People ate off wood. Anglo-Saxon excavations show many more wooden platters than earthenware plates. People drank from ash or alderwood cups that were turned on a foot-pedalled pole lathe. A leather thong was tied to a pole above the carpenter's head, wrapped around the lathe, then run down to the foot pedal. By keeping the thong tight around the lathe and by pedalling hard, the carpenter could get his piece of wood turning in alternately clockwise and counterclockwise directions — a simple but effective piece of self-powered technology that was still in use in English woodworking shops on the eve of the Second World War.

The forest was the mysterious home where the ancient spirits of the woodland lived. People foraged for firewood there. Its leaves provided winter bedding for cattle. Its charcoal pits supplied high-intensity fuel for the blacksmith. The forest was a place of refuge when the Vikings came, and in time of famine it was the larder of last resort. But most of all, in the year 1000, the farmed coppices of England's woodlands provided timber for the increasing numbers of towns being built all over the country.