

WULFGAR AND THE VIKINGS

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Foreword

Wulfgar and the Vikings is a delightful story that will carry the reader back more than a thousand years into England's past. It is also an authentic story that reaches into the records of the time for its historical background. It is the story of England's birth as a single coherent nation. That coherence began with a man called Alfred, who was thought at the time to be the least likely royal prince to succeed to the kingship, but who brought the newborn England through its tumultuous birth and gave it the royal and invaluable legacy of learning and the Holy Scriptures, a legacy which has remained alive to this day. It was the time in which one Wulfgar lived, and he has left us his own story of those days. It is a story well worth the reading.

Bill Cooper
Author of *After the Flood*

DEDICATION

To my dear Tony.

Without your unfailing support, Wulfgar's adventures
would never have been written.

Introduction

I hope you enjoy this story about the days of Alfred the Great. No one called him “the Great” in those days, he was not given that title until hundreds of years later, but I have tried to show you in the story what a great king he really was. What we know about Christians and how they lived at this time is very small but we can be sure there were some and that, just like Christians today, they had their faults as well as their strong points. Modern research¹ seems to indicate that although there had been some knowledge of Christianity in Britain for a very long time, in some places in Alfred’s time the Saxons had never really understood it or abandoned their pagan beliefs. Although I am only guessing, of course, it is quite possible that somewhere in Wessex in those war-torn times there was a village like Leofham where ... but I must not give away too much of the story!

¹Carver, Martin, Sanmark, Alex and Semple, Sarah (eds.), *Signals of Belief in Early England: Anglo-Saxon Paganism Revisited* (Oxford, 2010)

Chapter One

The Gods

I, Wulfgar, son of Waelwulf, descendant of Woden, son of Sceaf, son of Noah the flood-borne, desire to put on record the chief events of my life. Accordingly I begin with the days of my childhood in Leofham in the Kingdom of Wessex.

In the Year of Our Lord eight hundred and seventy eight I was learning the trade of a carpenter. I could remember nothing of my early childhood although I knew that Beorthelm Six-fingers, my master, had rescued me when I was a baby. At the time of my babyhood a great plague had swept through the village killing both my parents and all my siblings. Rumour had it that Beorthelm the gruff woodworker had been betrothed to my elder sister. I had lain weeping in my cradle amid the desolation caused by the plague and Beorthelm had taken me under his care: my tiny face had reminded him of hers. Beorthelm himself had never mentioned the circumstances – he was not a talkative man.

Leofham, hemmed in by the wild and pathless marshes, was self-contained: in the times of which I write it had to be. On its little plot of rising ground, deep in the peat marsh and bordered by forest, Leofham was cut off in those troubled days when enemies were pressing in on Wessex and the king himself was nowhere to be found. We had our fields, our cattle, our sheep and our pigs and if we needed more land the forest would yield to our axes. The King's reeve never came now to demand the royal food rents and no bishop's man came demanding corn and meat as *Church-scot* from us. All were cut off from us by the invaders whose harryings now extended over such a wide territory that no

one came struggling through the marshes and forests to find us. Thane Pelhere, wise far beyond his years, ruled our village justly, though now no Ealdorman ever called him to account. The elderly Reeve and the crusty old henchman, Grimbald, were his most experienced helpers; they alone survived from his father's generation.

The raiding Vikings from over the sea had left us alone – so far. Why should they not? If there had been a wealthy monastery or a nunnery full of pretty young nuns at Leofham we might have been in danger from their greed and cruelty. But, as it was, our isolated state meant that not much more than a few muddled ideas of Christianity had ever reached us to be mixed in with the old Saxon gods. Not only that but the pestilence soon wiped out even these traces of Christian ideas – but I am running far ahead of my tale ... Enough to say that almost none of the sometimes strange and even misshapen forms of Christianity which the monasteries often represented had made their way through the marsh to us either.

The forest that bordered the marshes provided Beorthelm with a supply of timber on which to exercise his skill. Carefully stacked and seasoned round the workshop hut where we lived was his collection, lovingly sorted and selected. This piece was for boards for building, this for a table and this for bowls and dishes – for Beorthelm was skilled at turning and had taught me also the art of using his lathe. There were also the timbers he was carefully hoarding up for his grand project. This was to replace completely the mead hall of Thane Pelhere which, although it was the grandest and most stately building I had ever seen, was not quite large enough to accommodate all the village for a feast.

“We will construct its outer walls around the present hall,” he explained to me as he fondly looked over the hoard of well seasoned timber set aside for the project, “then we can take down the old hall bit by bit and erect the new pillars to support the roof.”

Thane Pelhere approved of this plan since he would then be without his hall for the minimum length of time. He did not want

the new hall to be on a different site – and he had strong reasons. “The hall-place is sacred,” he reminded us one spring morning when he had called to look over Beorthelm’s carefully prepared timbers, “it is the spot where the dragon was slain by Tiw when he came down to help our people settle in these lands. The very fire pit itself is where the dragon breathed its last fiery breath and Tiw decreed that our mead-hall should be there ever after.”

Beorthelm looked grave, “Better not move it then or the dragon might return,” he said.

The thane looked at him suspiciously, wondering if Beorthelm was laughing at him for being credulous but the carpenter had composed his face carefully so that no trace of a smile could be seen.

“Do you believe all the stories about the old gods – Tiw, Woden and the rest?” I asked Beorthelm when the thane had gone, for this was not the first time I had heard him say or hint things that made me wonder.

Beorthelm sat down on some planks and looked down at his hands. The right one was perfectly normal. The left had the first two fingers missing leaving an ugly gap between the last two and the thumb. He had learned to be careful with his sharp tools the hard way.

“No,” he said at last, “I don’t think I do. Tiw the one handed, Woden the one eyed, no doubt they were real enough – just as you and I are – back in the far off days of our ancestors. But did they create all this?” he waved his hand around indicating the sky, the woods, ourselves, “No.”

“Who did then?” I asked.

“I do not know,” he answered, “but someone far greater than Tiw or Woden must have done it. A being not petty-minded or cruel, as they were, but good – for otherwise there would be no good on the earth. I often wonder,” he went on musing, “who

gave men the gift of knowing what is good and right – what is a loyal and noble deed.”

I was silent, hardly understanding what he meant at first. “I wonder more where evil comes from,” I said at length, “Why can people not always be loyal, do the right thing, the kind thing? Why do they kill and steal, break their word? Why can they never live in peace?”

Beorthelm shrugged his shoulders.

“What about the Christian God then?” I ventured, “He would surely give men goodness.”

Beorthelm laughed cynically, “Judge for yourself,” he said, “where did all our *Church-scot* go, in the days before the Viking scourge put a stop it, but to his monasteries and bishops? *We* gave to *him*. This he would not need if he made everything.”

“Didn’t these payments go to the monasteries not to the Christian God himself?” I asked.

Beorthelm’s face became even more cynical, “Yes,” he said, “and it’s a good ruse isn’t it? Renounce the world and be enriched with all its treasures, work your way up the system and become a powerful ruler – no, no, if that is the Christian God’s method, he is even less believable than Woden and Tiw.”

“It was a noble deed when you took me up,” I said venturing for the first time to allude to our strange relationship.

Beorthelm smiled, “Ah, but you see you have repaid me,” he replied.

“Have I?” I asked very surprised.

“Yes, indeed,” he replied, “bringing you up has stanchd my grief and given me a life-purpose.”

I was silent, trying to take in this new information and unable to reply, though a thousand thoughts jostled in my mind.

“I wonder,” I said at last, struck by the idea of some great being above Woden, above all the gods, “how we can know him ... find him ... could we?” The idea of such a being filled my mind with questions but whom could I ask?

“If he was the man-maker would he not hear prayer from his creatures?” asked the carpenter.