

## HEREWARD THE WAKE *by Alan Fleming*

History does not record when Hereward the Wake was born but it was probably about 1035. The name Wake is said to be derived from the old Danish language meaning wary. My own view on the meaning is quite different and that is that he left chaos in his wake. However, he was a Saxon, with Danish ancestry, who was born into a wealthy Saxon family who held lands in Lincolnshire prior to the Norman invasion. His father was Leofric of Mercia and his mother was Lady Godiva, famed for her naked ride through Coventry. It is said that he was a bit of a hot head and was always in trouble. His mother wanted him to become a monk but he was having none of that. He gathered a group of young men and fled to the fens where he was known as the terror of the fens. They did not do anything nasty just youthful boyish pranks much the same as youngsters nowadays. His father could not do anything to control him and asked the King, Edward the Confessor to outlaw him. The king agreed and Hereward was exiled from Mercia.

The writ of outlawry did not apply to Northumbria which was ruled by an independent Lord known as Gilbert of Ghent, family name Fleming, no connection, I think. Now the cunning Fleming knew that the writ of outlawry could be reversed at any time. He therefore welcomed Hereward as he hoped that Hereward would eventually rule England. After some time in Northumbria Hereward went to Flanders in Belgium where he fought in many battles. He gained quite a reputation as a warrior and was feared by the enemies of Flanders. He had a sword which was known as brain biter which had a blade almost four foot long, much like a broad sword. It is said that the sword was capable of cutting through a steel helmet and straight in the skull, hence the name brain biter.

The death of Edward the Confessor left England in disarray with various claims to the English throne and open to an invasion from both the Normans and the Vikings. The Vikings were defeated by King Harold at Stamford in Lincolnshire but his victory was short lived.

The Normans had landed at Hastings and he had to march his men south to engage them in battle. William won the day and became King of England. The feudal system brought here by the Normans was based on an oath of allegiance and military support in exchange for a reward of lands. English lands were given to Norman supporters of William. The seizure of lands and property was brutal. Only two Saxon Englishmen were left as the only Saxon landowners in England, both of whom had turned traitor and supported William against the Saxons. Thorkill of Arden was one of these Saxons and he had his land taken during the reign of William Rufus.

The news of the defeat of King Harold brought Hereward back to England. The Normans had seized his father's estates. The new Norman owner had not only taken the land, but had also slain his brother, whose head was set above the door of the house. Hereward armed with his famous sword brain biter took his revenge on as many Normans as he could. He then

nailed the Norman heads above the door of the family house. Hereward had no alternative but to leave his lands and rebel against the Normans. He fled into the fens once more as he had done when younger, where he was harboured by Abbot Thurstan of Ely. The Fens are an area of former wetlands in the counties of Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and Norfolk now known as East Anglia. The fens in those days were thickly forested and made a good hiding place, where Hereward could strike from at any time.

In February 1067 the English, led by King Harold's mother Gytha, resisted the Normans at Exeter but were defeated. Another rebellion in the North also resulted in the defeat of the English. It is possible that Hereward joined these Saxon English rebellions, as he was certainly in contact with the Saxon rebels and the family of King Harold. Hereward in 1070, four years after the Battle of Hastings, made plans for another rebellion with the brother of King Harold, Earl Morcar of Northumbria. The Danish king Swein Estrithson sent a small army to England and established a stronghold on the Isle of Ely, where they were joined by the English rebels including Hereward and Earl Morcar. The Isle of Ely is centred in Cambridge. The name Isle comes from the high ground amid the fens and Ely it is said refers to the eels formerly in the waters. Hereward the Wake then led a raid on Peterborough Cathedral as he wished to save the treasures and relics from the Normans. He shared the gold he had taken with the Danes, who then deserted Hereward and returned to their homelands. The Normans tried to gain access to the Isle of Ely across causeways at Stuntney, Little Thetford and Aldreth but were ambushed by Hereward and his followers and they failed to reach the rebels base. What the rebels did was to set fire to the reeds that grew in the Fens when the Normans were half way across. Whilst the Normans were in flight from the flames they were showered with arrows, and the rebels were victorious. It is recorded that over a hundred Normans died in the battle. In a chronicle written 50 years after the Norman assault on Ely the author claims to have seen fishermen dragging out, Norman skeletons still in their rusty armour.

The threat posed by Hereward was seen as serious and Abbot Thurstan of Ely, fearing for the future of his abbey, betrayed Hereward. He showed the Normans the secret way across to the Isle of Ely and the Normans attacked. Earl Morcar was captured but Hereward and a handful of his men managed to escape. They hid from the Normans in the forests of the Fens. It is not known how long Hereward and his followers lived as outlaws in the forests of the Fens. Nevertheless, he apparently held out against the Normans until King William was

persuaded to come to terms. Hereward's lands were restored to him and his rebellious days of fighting were over. Sadly, some time later he was ambushed by a band of jealous Normans he killed 15 of them with his famous sword brain biter, but he was stabbed in the back and fell dying, a hero to the end. That may have been the end of a hero but songs were being sung about him in taverns 100 years after his death. People even made pilgrimages to his ruined wooden castle in the fens.



Alan Fleming is now working with Taxi Drivers & Owners Legal Protection Ltd. So if you are looking for the best legal representation in the trade perhaps you may consider joining our new legal insurance scheme, which is run by Alan and Dave Cohen.

Dave can be contacted on 07956 894 701, Alan can be contacted on 07831 092 123.

## Taxi Air Conditioning

All makes Serviced and Repaired

Mobile Service - We come to you

**Tel: 020 8715 0079**

Covering London & The Home Counties