

The Years In Between by Roger Penfound

Chapter 1: Offa's Mount

The sun was low in the Western sky casting long shadows across the flat top of Offa's Mount. The barren rock rose like a fortress from the flat plains of eastern England which stretched as far as the eyes could see to the South, West and North. Only to the East did the inhospitable North Sea present a different vista - reaching out to the Nordic countries from which Viking raiding parties had from time to time invaded the lowlands - burning, pillaging and raping as they left their indelible mark on the countryside.

The origins of the rock were unknown. In centuries still to come, geographers and scientists would argue about what caused it to be here. Its dark, igneous rock was different to the loamy sediment of the lowland pasture that had been laid down millions of years previously when the land had been covered by a tropical sea. Some would claim that it was carried here by an immense glacier during the Pleistocene period over two and a half million years ago – born on a tongue of ice over twelve thousand feet thick from as far away as modern Iceland. Others would claim more fantastically that it was the remnants of a meteorite - part of an old planet that had exploded in a distant galaxy and had arrived here containing secrets which still lay hidden within its impenetrable core.

But for the people who had lived in its shadow for generations, Offa's Mount was a symbol of their very being. It represented continuity and eternity. It provided safety in times of turmoil and it was a natural place to speak to the gods who had dominion over their fragile lives. In times past, they had taken refuge on its steep slopes as they sought to repel invaders or hide from marauding animals. On occasions, The Mount had been their final retreat when invaders had forced whole communities to jump from its sheer Eastern face to avoid the torment of capture. And so the rock had acquired a mystical and fatalistic quality which helped to define the people who lived within its shadow.

Now, from the pastures below, the sound of chanting was carried upward on the gusty wind that chased around the scrubby peak. Slowly, a line of people emerged from the hamlet which sat beside a river known as the Fram. They were picking their way up winding pathways to the summit of Offa's Mount, led by bearded men dressed in rough wool tunics. Behind them a boy strapped to a rough wooden platform was being carried by four pall bearers. His body was ravaged and wounded. His eyes were glazed.

It was the year 920 AD. Large parts of England had been united by Edward the Elder, son of Alfred the Great, who had driven the invading Danish armies further North. Under Edward's rule, Christianity had become the dominant religion but pockets of paganism still existed in more isolated areas where people worshipped Woden, the god of war and wisdom. Especially in times of hardship, the subsistence farmers would turn to their traditional gods for help and offer sacrifices to secure their benevolence.

Behind the priests and the young man came a straggly line of villagers, dressed in loose fitting skins and rough linen tunics. They were led by a man and a woman clothed in finer fabric and adorned with jewelled belts and pendants. He was Aethelwulf, head man of the village. With his three sons, he ruled the settlement with an iron fist. He received duties on any goods that passed through his domain. He levied a protection tax to ensure the safety of the community and he connived and schemed with one faction against another to concentrate his power. To fall out with Aethelwulf meant certain demise.

The boy, whose name was Cedric, felt the ropes pull on his arms as the priests in front of him continued their slow pace up the flank of Offa's Mount. Their hypnotic chanting filled the air with an ominous foreboding. Ahead of him lay the precipice - a place where many before him had been thrown to their deaths. He was sixteen and he had seen so little.

The settlement on the banks of the Fram had existed since Roman times nearly five hundred years before. It sat at the farthest point on the river that small boats could reach from the sea. The Romans had built a landing stage here and transported wood and grain to the coast where it was transferred to larger ships. After the Romans left in the early fifth century, any semblance of a township vanished. The quayside was swept away in a storm and a nearby Roman villa was demolished by locals in search of materials for building their own homes. Fram Ton was little more than a collection of stone and mud huts from which a population of no more than fifty souls eked out a perilous living by fishing in the river and carrying out subsistence farming.

Towards the end of the fifth century, invaders arrived – Saxons from Germanic countries across the North Sea. At first, they came in waves, plundering and slaughtering. It was during this period that many people were driven to the top of Offa's Mount in search of refuge but with no further retreat possible, they leapt from the top of the Mount to be dashed to their deaths on the rocks below.

In later years, the Saxons began to settle and integrate with what was left of the original population. They were descended from the Iceni tribe, once famously led by Queen Boudicca who defeated The Roman invaders before being forced to take her own life. The landing stage by the river Fram was restored and a rickety stone bridge was constructed which enabled taxes to be collected from travellers passing through the settlement. By 904 when Cedric was born in the single room dwelling that was shared with his mother, father and two older brothers, Fram Ton was beginning to take on the appearance of a small medieval town with its name evolving to the more easily pronounced 'Frampton'.

Cedric's earliest memories were of playing on the dirt floor close to the fire grate where his mother would cook broth and roast small animal carcasses. His older brothers would often be close by – teasing him and causing mischief. Cedric always felt more at peace when alone in his mother's company. He loved to watch her stirring the contents of the large iron pot which was suspended over the wood fire. He would often sit on her lap as she sung him songs – tales of love and battle and loss. Her long dark hair was braided into plaits which hung nearly to her waist. Her face had a slight Nordic look which suggested a mixture of Iceni and Saxon blood.

When his father was at home, Cedric experienced a different atmosphere. He felt tension and fear. His father was a big man with long tangled hair and an unkempt beard. Signs of Viking blood

were difficult to ignore. He earned a meagre living by hauling goods in a cart that he had built from rough-hewn forest wood. He hauled stone from a nearby quarry and carried grain to the landing stage. The family was known locally as the Carters family.

When there was no carting work, Cedric's father would hunt – wild boar, rabbits and duck. On good days he would sit by the fire laughing as his wife cooked the trophies he had trapped or shot with his bow. On bad days, when food was scarce, he would curse and swear, subjecting his wife to sudden blows across the back as she struggled to manage whatever meagre meal he had been able to obtain. On those days, Cedric crawled quietly under a table and hid in the shadows until his father passed out from the effects of the weed that he smoked in a rough clay pipe.

One autumn day when he was seven years old, Cedric was sitting outside the house watching his mother wash vegetables in a bucket of water. It was another timeless day. The sun sat low over Offa's Mount casting a shadow that crept slowly towards the village. A group of men were unloading stone from a wooden barge that had been dragged along the river from the quarry. Their shouts and laughter mixed languidly with the barking of dogs and the lowing of cattle.

Suddenly there was a shout – anxious and urgent. The men by the river grabbed staves and stones and started running towards the bridge. His mother grabbed him by the hand and pulled him inside. But she tripped, banging her head against a post and let go of his arm. Instinctively he ran towards the commotion to see what had caused it. As he got to the river he could see a large boat, its front end tethered to the bank. And jumping onto the shore were armed men – some wearing helmets- some brandishing shields – most wielding swords.

“Danes! Danes!” he heard people scream as they ran to take shelter. He could see the men who had been unloading the barge taking on the invaders but they were no match for the sword wielding attackers. He saw them fall, blood gushing from wounds and severed limbs lying nearby. He turned to run back to his house but saw that it was already too late. Danes were running amongst the buildings, breaking down doors and setting light to straw roofs. Screams penetrated the air and smoke began to spiral upwards.

Cedric dived for cover under an upturned cart and knelt in the blackness, his arms wrapped over his head in an attempt to block out the cries. It seemed an eternity before silence fell and the hoarse calls of the invaders receded. He stayed under the cart throughout the following night, only venturing out when the first rays of morning sun crept beneath his hiding place. What greeted him was a scene of desolation and carnage. Most buildings had been destroyed. Bodies littered the ground – most with gaping wounds or limbs missing. Only a few haunted souls who had evaded the slaughter wandered aimlessly, their eyes unable to comprehend what they were seeing.

Cedric made his way to his house. The door was lying at a crazy angle - half open and half closed. The remnants of the roof still smouldered dropping hot straws onto the earth floor. As his eyes followed them, he saw his mother. Her plaits had been cut and were laying discarded near-by. Her tunic had been cut from her body. Dried blood covered her skin. Her abdomen had been slashed.

Cedric threw himself at her prostrate body, calling her name and clutching at her remaining clothes. He buried his head into her chest and lost consciousness.

It was hours later when he felt himself being roughly pulled away. His father stood over him with his older brother nearby. Their faces were ashen. They had been away hunting when the attack occurred, and recognising they were outnumbered, they had taken refuge in the forest – only returning when the Danes had left. Cedric looked into his father's eyes for love – for reassurance, but saw only blackness and contempt.

In the days and months after the raid, the village recovered slowly. Almost a quarter of the eighty five inhabitants had been slain and many of the women had been raped. In nine months-time there would be new babies, many with red hair providing a lasting reminder of their paternity. But they would grow up to be accepted by the village. It was how things were. Life was fragile and hard. It was often short.

Cedric's middle brother had been killed, sliced nearly in half as he played with other children down by the landing stage. His older brother, Alfred, was fifteen and spent his time with his father, hunting and fishing. Alfred was like his father, reclusive and moody. Most of the time he ignored Cedric, preferring instead to sit alone sharpening his hunting knives.

The loss of Cedric's mother wasn't spoken about. She had been taken with the other slain victims to a point where the River Fram began to widen as it approached the coast. There, she was wrapped in a thin shroud and cast into the fast flowing ebb tide that bore her quickly into the North Sea. Cedric had watched in stupefied silence as his mother disappeared, knowing full well that with her went the last remnants of love that he had known.

After her loss, Cedric often found himself at a loose end. His brother and father would frequently be away for days on their hunting trips leaving him with chores to carry out around their simple home. Once these were despatched, Cedric was free to do as he pleased. He would wander round the village looking at the reconstruction that was well under-way and listening to the gossip of the workmen who hauled stones from the nearby quarry to the building sites.

The new homes that were replacing the old thatch shelters were more substantial and contained more stone. Cedric watched as small boulders were placed one upon another to form a wall and then the gaps between filled with a mixture of mud and lime. Within a few days it would set rock solid.

There were already examples of large stone buildings in the country that Cedric had heard travellers talking about. Mostly these were churches constructed as Christianity began to spread slowly through the land from the end of the sixth century. However many of these had been destroyed by the Viking raids but some centres of Christianity still remained and their shaky influence extended across the nearby countryside.

By the summer of 915, Frampton was beginning to look like a settlement again. Buildings constructed from stone formed a main thoroughfare which led up to a new bridge that crossed the Fram. The building of the bridge had been supervised by Aethelwulf, head of one of the most influential families in the village. He was tall and broad shouldered with a ruddy face that was

covered in red hair. His Danish ancestry was not in doubt and it was thought that this fact had helped to keep Danish invaders away from the settlement in recent years.

Aethelwulf had three powerfully built sons who protected their father's interests with great zeal. Anyone who fell out with their father or refused his demands would find themselves bloodied and mutilated. And so, with his power and influence, Aethelwulf was able to replace the old rickety bridge over the Fram with a much more substantial stone built structure. He built his family home close to the entrance to the bridge in the style of a small fortification and then set about collecting tolls from travellers heading for the North Sea ports or farmers wanting to move their flocks to pastures on the other side of the river. Not only did this begin to accrue wealth for him but it also provided him with the latest news and information which he used to secure his fiefdom.

And so it was that in August 917 a Benedictine monk called Francis made his way to Frampton. Cedric was watching from the riverbank as he arrived leading a grey mule laden with bags. As he made his way slowly towards the bridge, Cedric fell in behind. He had learned to remain invisible by moving stealthily from one piece of cover to the next but always close enough to hear what was said.

When the monk reached the bridge, he stopped and looked around, aware that his progress was about to be impeded.

"What ails you father?", came the booming voice of Aethelwulf as he emerged from his toll house chewing on a hogs bone.

"Greetings," replied Francis. "May God's blessings be upon you."

Aethelwulf let out a roar from deep within his belly. "It's not your god's blessings I'm after Father – it's your toll I want for crossing this bridge."

"What will you charge?" asked Francis, sensing that any negotiation was probably in vain.

"Well now, that depends," replied Aethelwulf tugging at his tangled beard.

"What does it depend on?" replied Francis becoming irritated.

"Depends why you want to cross my bridge."

"My business has nothing to do with you."

"Oh yes it does. If you cross my bridge – your business is my business. That's the way it works."

"Stand aside and let me through. I'm on the Lord's business."

With that, Francis, who still retained the agility of his youth, grabbed the harness of the mule and set off at a pace across the river. Aethelwulf let out another roar, more sinister than the first. Francis by this time was about one third of the way across the bridge. Suddenly one of his sons appeared in the doorway – looking to his father for instructions. Within seconds he was racing across the bridge in hot pursuit of Francis. He reached him by the mid-point of the bridge, seizing his habit

and pulling him to the ground. As the mule continued to canter over the bridge, the son lifted Francis with his arms extended and held him above his head.

A crowd had now begun to gather on the town side of the river and were hugely enjoying the spectacle. They roared their approval as Aethelwulf's son began to pirouette on the bridge, turning Francis around with increasing speed. As Francis's cries rang out, he was tossed into the air and over the bridge parapet. He landed in the murky water below with his habit billowing around him like an inflated cushion.

As he flailed around in the water becoming increasingly trapped within his habit, Aethelwulf signalled to the bystanders to pull him out. Three men waded into the mud and managed to haul Francis unceremoniously back to the shore. In the meantime, Aethelwulf's son had retrieved the disorientated mule from the far end of the bridge.

"What happened to your god?" bellowed Aethelwulf as he was hauled onto the shore. "I heard the Christian god saved men's souls. Maybe he hasn't heard of you," roared Aethelwulf enjoying his tormenting.

"God saves the souls of those who follow him. And I would say he's done quite a good job. You spared my life sir. Maybe he's recognised a potential soul to save. Perhaps you are a chosen one."

There was a murmur of appreciation from amongst the on-lookers which was noticed by Aethelwulf. His position in the village needed constant protection from potential challengers. Perhaps being a 'chosen one' would help to secure his control. Just as he was considering this, his son arrived with the mule still laden with bags.

"Let's see what working for your god involves," announced Aethelwulf to the crowd. He signalled to his son to cut open the bags.

"My betting is you're running off with the silver from one of those monasteries. Isn't that right Father – you're nothing but a thief?"

His son pulled out a package from the first bag and unwrapped it. A gasp rose up from the onlookers. He was holding a leather bound book with an ornately decorated cover inlaid with gold.

"What's this then father?" demanded Aethelwulf.

"It's the testament of the Apostle Mathew. My job is to read the testaments to people and convert them to the way of The Lord."

The crowd were visibly impressed by the book and others that followed. Though no one in the village could read or write, most knew of the existence of books in the great Abbeys - some of which dated back to Roman times. Sadly, many of these had now been lost or destroyed during Danish raids.

Altogether, Aethelwulf's son produced ten books from the bags that hung either side of the mule. The books were held up for the crowd to see – some of them intricately calligraphed - objects of beauty and awe.

Now, although Aethelwulf was a hard man who built his reputation on fear and retribution – he was not stupid. Seeing the reaction of the locals to these works of art and having the idea planted in his head that he might be a ‘chosen one’ – he began to see an opportunity to consolidate his power base.

“Father,” he began in a more conciliatory voice. “I’ve been harsh. If your god has chosen me I must get to know him better. Come into my house and dry your clothes. Then tonight we will have a feast and you will read to us from your books.”

A roar of approval rang out from the crowd. A feast provided by Aethelwulf was always an occasion for great merriment and tonight there would be entertainment too.

From behind the pile of wood where Cedric had taken refuge, he felt an immense excitement. To him the books represented something magical. They were a door to another world – away from the grime and uncertainty of life in the settlement. He had often dreamed of escaping – of exploring the world beyond the narrowness of his daily existence. He had heard travellers tell tales of lands beyond the seas where strange buildings as high as mountains reached into the sky and people lived in fertile valleys and sang to the accompaniment of instruments strung with animal gut. He wanted desperately to hear what the monk read from the magic books.

The monk was taken into the toll house and given a room to wait in whilst his clothes were dried. Francis was a somewhat pragmatic follower of the Christian faith. He had been brought up in a monastery and taught to read Latin from an early age. His parents had been killed in a Viking raid and he had few memories of them. He had no time for the chanting and the ritual of monastic life. Instead, he wanted to be on the road, meeting people and spreading the word of the gospels which he believed offered the only hope to England’s divided peoples. As such, he saw a chance here to make a stand and gain influence. If he was right, Aethelwulf wanted to increase his influence and stature in the village. Becoming the benefactor to a scholar and man of God would certainly achieve this in the eyes of the local people. He thought carefully about the scriptures he would read tonight. They had to underpin the authority of just rulers and implant the idea that such people were handed this authority from God. But he couldn’t just read from the scriptures – they were written in Latin. He would have to translate and possibly improvise where necessary.

In the courtyard outside the fortified house, a large bonfire had been built by Aethelwulf’s three sons. Orange flames leapt into the evening sky showering the surrounding area with ash and hot embers. To one side, meat was roasting on a spit and a cask of ale had been set up nearby. To the side of the fire, a small stage had been constructed on which were positioned two chairs – one for the monk and one for Aethelwulf.

As the sun set, villagers emerged from the shadows – many of them observing a reverential silence in recognition of the uniqueness of this event. As slices of meat were handed out and people filled their flasks with ale, the tension subsided and was replaced with banter and laughter.

Suddenly the crowd fell silent as Aethelwulf emerged. He had draped himself in a shawl which was secured at the waist by a chord. Into the chord was tucked his favourite knife - an ornate weapon that had been found in an ancient burial mound thought to be that of an Iceni tribal warrior. From his position close to the fire but hidden behind a hand cart, Cedric stifled a laugh at the site of

their feared leader dressed like a wood nymph. Behind him followed the monk, his head bowed. In his hands he carried four of the 'magic' books.

"People of Frampton" bellowed Aethelwulf, "today a stranger has come into our midst and being of a mind not to pay a toll to cross the river, I had him thrown into the water."

There was laughter and shouting from the audience which had now grown to about fifty people.

"Turns out that this man is a monk on his way from the old Roman city of Norvic. He says he's doing his god's work. We don't know his god in these parts though we've heard travellers talk of this new Christianity which has taken a hold in some parts. So I thought it right we should give him a hearing. Let's find out about his god and see if we like him. If we do, we might ask him to stay. If we don't, we'll tie his legs together and watch him float away on the morning tide."

There were nods of ascent and approval from the watching crowd.

"So now Father," he said turning to address Francis, "be seated and read to us from your books."

Francis turned to face his audience. Eager faces looked up, filled with childlike anticipation. He sat gravely into his chair and picked up one of the books. He knew enough about mime theatre to know that creating the right impression and getting the audience on his side was all important. There was a gasp from the audience as he opened the first book.

"Good people of Frampton, it is no accident that I am with you today. I have been sent here by Almighty God to save your souls."

Another gasp from the audience. Aethelwulf looked slightly sceptical.

"The Almighty sent his son Jesus Christ down to earth almost one thousand years ago to bring proof of the Almighty's love for all of you. I am going to read to you now about some of the miracles that he performed so that you will be overcome with joy and want to devote yourself to him."

Francis then proceeded to tell of the miracles that Jesus had performed – transforming water into wine, raising Lazarus from the dead and feeding the multitude with only a few fish. His audience was riveted as his stories unfolded. He didn't read from the bible – instead he told the stories as he remembered them in language that they could understand. Every so often he would look down and turn a page as if his words were coming from the magic books themselves.

After the third parable, Francis became aware that Aethelwulf was distinctly restless. During a pause, he leant across to Francis and in the lowest voice he could muster demanded to know 'what had happened to the bit about being his god's chosen representative.'

"Quite so," replied Francis. "I'm just coming to that now."

Aethelwulf sat back and smiled benignly at his people.

"Now I come to the most important thing that I have to say - something that will change your lives forever."

A sea of faces looked at him with reverential anticipation.

“God Almighty is master of all creation and we owe our allegiance to him. But God rules over us by those he has appointed to act on his behalf.”

The audience looked less sure. Aethelwulf lifted himself in his chair and puffed out his chest.

“Let me read to you from the scriptures – from the book of Romans chapter thirteen.”

He opened the ornately gilded bible that lay to one side of him and turned the pages with a theatrical flourish. The Latin text was in large, bold, handwritten script.

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

He translated as “Almighty God rules the world but appoints earthly representatives to carry out his work,”

Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.

“If you resist the authority of his representatives, God will judge you harshly.”

Aethelwulf nodded gravely.

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.

“Do as you are commanded in the name of The Lord and you will be saved.”

For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.

Francis decided to skip this verse as he felt that fear and wrath had probably been stressed enough. He moved quickly to chapter seven which he felt certain would secure his freedom.

Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour.

“And remember that when you are called upon to pay taxes and dues to Aethelwulf, you are in fact paying them to God Almighty for whom Aethelwulf is God’s appointed representative on earth.”

Aethelwulf nodded enthusiastically. Francis decided to end with a flourish of his own making.

“Hear the words of our Lord Jesus because today you have been saved and will be welcomed into his eternal paradise when your time on this earth comes to an end.”

He was met by a sea of smiling faces and a suffocating hug from Aethelwulf for whom the text of verse seven had underpinned his divine authority to impose taxes and tolls. He could almost feel his wealth growing exponentially.

“People of Frampton,” he called out as he released his grip on Francis, we are indeed fortunate that this monk has, on this very day, been delivered to us by his god – a god who has chosen me to rule on his behalf. As this monk tells us, he is a loving god and so I will love you so long as you pay your taxes and dues. But those who disobey me are also disobeying this new god and I fear his vengeance will be swift and dreadful.”

The faces in the crowd clouded as memories of Aethelwulf’s acts of vengeance came swiftly to mind.

“But enough of that talk – let’s celebrate because the monk will stay. I will ask him to establish his religion here in Frampton so that we can get to know this new god better. And to help him, I will authorise the building of a church – the first in these parts - to celebrate our conversion to this Christian faith.”

There were loud cheers from the audience though some remained muted and slipped away from the crowd.

Francis breathed a sigh of relief. His life had been saved for now and he would soon have his own church – a huge accolade for a young monk. However he did wonder how long this accommodation with Aethelwulf would last given his unpredictable nature and propensity towards violence.

Away from the smouldering fire and the remnants of the feast, a small group of villagers gathered in a huddle. They were leaders of the pagan tradition, a religion that venerated the god Woden - a fierce and relentless deity who demanded constant sacrifice from his followers to stave off the incessant threat of famine and disease. The religion, which was steeped in mystery and ritual, had been handed down through generations from the great Icenic tribe who had lived in this part of England during the Roman occupation. Those who claimed to be priests and followers were fearful of the threat posed by the spread of Christianity to their authority and sought wherever possible to destroy the new religion.

Chapter 2: The Miracle of Water

Work on the new church began almost immediately with Aethelwulf ordering his three sons to take control of the project. Francis designed a simple stone structure with shuttered windows as glass was not readily available. At one end was an altar table roughly hewn from oak. Under the table was a casket containing a small piece of bone which Francis claimed was a fragment taken from the body of St. Peter. No one disputed his claim and it served to heighten the sense of mystery and awe. Francis was well aware of the importance of paganism in the lives of the population and realised that his version of Christianity needed to have equal amounts of spectacle and theatre to satisfy the simple needs of these people.

As the church grew in size, Cedric slowly began to emerge from the shadows and started to take an active part in its construction. At first he carried stones and helped to mix lime, but later he attached himself to one of the masons and began to shape the rock that had been carried from the quarry into rectangular building blocks.

His father also found work. Each day he would haul his cart with Cedric's older brother to the quarry where it would be loaded with rocks that had been hacked from a seam of sandstone. Then the two of them would haul their load for three miles along rough tracks back to the village. The work was tough and relentless. They seldom made more than one journey a day and were rewarded with a measure of grain which they could grind to make flour.

After the death of Cedric's mother, Cedric's father had taken a new wife – a woman who had been widowed by the same Viking raid in which Cedric's mother had been killed. Life in the village was pragmatic. A single man and a single woman were of no use. Together, they could form a functioning household and bear new children to replace those who would inevitably die.

His new wife was hard and aloof. Her face bore the lines and scars of a deprived existence. She and Cedric's father seldom spoke – preferring instead to get on with the simple tasks which filled their days. When a new son was born, there was rejoicing in the household and Cedric found himself even more marginalised and increasingly ignored by his father for whom his very existence brought back memories of his first wife.

With little to occupy him, Cedric found himself spending time with the monk, or Father Francis as he preferred to be called. Initially Cedric would sweep the floor. There were no seats in the church except one for Aethelwulf who presided from a large winged chair close to the altar. After some weeks, Francis gave Cedric simple tasks to carry out during services. He led Francis into the Church carrying the precious hand written Bible and laid it on a small table in front of the congregation. Francis, who was draped in a white cassock, ignored traditional church dogma and instead created his own services, the focal point of which was a reading in Latin from the testaments. Cedric held the Bible in front of Father Francis as his voice boomed out across the church, his arms aching with fatigue if the reading went on for too long. But he never failed to be entranced by the poetry of the language he couldn't understand. After each verse in Latin, Father

Francis translated into the local dialect and explained the story. He never failed to enthral his audience with tales of extraordinary miracles in distant lands.

One morning as Cedric was polishing two candlesticks that Aethelwulf had taken from a traveller with no money to pay the bridge toll, Father Francis approached him with a proposition.

“Cedric, you have been assisting me now for nearly half a year and I am impressed with your diligence. I am aware of your situation at home and I am prepared to offer you a position.”

“What kind of position?” enquired Cedric.

“As my student. I need someone who can learn and support me as our congregation grows. Aethelwulf has promised to build me a small house. I can no longer live in his toll house with all the womanising and drinking that goes on. It drives me to distraction. I thought that you might join me and I will teach you how to read the gospels.”

A sudden surge of intense happiness consumed Cedric.

“You mean teach me how to read Latin?”

“Read and write it. I think you will make a good scholar and we will get on well together.”

For the next six months, Cedric worked tirelessly under the tutelage of Father Francis. Slowly, seemingly incomprehensible jumbles of words revealed their secrets and the books began to speak to him, revealing insights into a magic world known only to a select few. Not only did his ability to read and speak Latin gather pace, but his excitement at discovering the secrets of this new faith made him a willing convert to Christianity.

In the spring of 916, as a warm sun lit the banks of the River Fram, Father Francis conducted his first baptism to induct new members into the faith. He had selected a small group who would act as leaders and mentors within the growing congregation and awarded each of them a Christian name. Aethelwulf, much to Francis’s relief, had refused to be baptised as he argued that it was beneath the dignity of God’s chosen representative on earth to be immersed in water.

A group of twelve individuals who Aethelwulf referred to as his ‘apostles’ gathered by the water’s edge at high tide. Cedric was amongst them. Francis carried a large wooden cross which he had commissioned from one of the local carpenters. After a few short prayers, Francis waded into the water until it was up to his waste and called out his incantation.

“Father, we ask you to bless this water, that those who are baptized in it may be cleansed in the water of life, and, filled with your Spirit may know that they are loved as your children safe in Christ for ever.”

Francis then beckoned to the small group to enter the water but there was considerable reluctance to submit themselves to the murky river when it seemed far more pleasant observing the proceedings from the bank. Realising that Francis might be left alone in the water, Cedric hauled off

his outer tunic and waded out to where he was standing. Even though the sun was shining, the water temperature was low and Cedric gasped as he went further in.

Francis looked relieved that at least one of his congregation had come forward. Holding his cross in one hand and raising his arms to the sky he called out...

"We praise you, loving Father for the gift of your son Jesus. He was baptised in the River Jordan where your spirit came upon him and revealed him as the son you love. He sent his followers to baptise all who turn to him. Now, Father, we ask you to bless this sinner and accept him into thy kingdom."

Without further warning, Francis grasped the crown of Cedric's head and pushed him firmly into the water. He emerged, spluttering and gasping as Francis continued ...

"...I baptise you David in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. May almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness, and lead you in the light and obedience of Christ."

As Cedric was rubbing salt water from his eyes, he suddenly caught sight of Aethelwulf standing on the nearby bridge. His hands were planted firmly on his hips and his posture looked menacing. He fleetingly wondered whether Aethelwulf really was committed to this new religion and its freshly installed apostle.

That night when Cedric and Francis were alone in the small church house, Francis rummaged inside a large pocket attached to his tunic and finally pulled out a small object.

"David" he announced (for that was now his Christian name) – you're a great support for me. I saw what you did this morning when you were the first to enter the water. You showed leadership and loyalty. I want to give you something as a token of my appreciation."

He unclasped his hand to reveal a small ring in his palm. It was bronze in colour with script engraved around its circumference.

"Thankyou" whispered Cedric examining the ring and turning it over in his hand. "It's beautiful. But you don't have too...."

"I insist," replied Francis. "I want you to look at the words."

Cedric turned the ring over and held the band to the light.

"Can you see what it says?"

"It's Latin I think."

"Indeed it is. See if you can work out its meaning."

Cedric turned the ring again and slowly read the inscription.

"Sorte per Veritas"

"What does it mean? There's one word you know."

Cedric looked again.

“Veritas – that means truth.”

“Correct. What about Sorte?”

Cedric racked his brain for some clue.

“I don’t know.”

“Sorte means fate or destiny. It’s in the dative case, so it means ‘to or towards destiny’”

Cedric turned the ring again, studying the engraving and watching as the firelight glistened on the bronze surface.

“So is it ‘towards destiny through truth’? enquired Cedric tentatively?”

“That’s an approximate translation – yes,” replied Francis. “I think it means that you can only achieve your destiny by accepting the truth.”

“What truth?”

“Well that’s a good question. Being a man of God, I would argue that the only truth is God and he is our destiny. But you could equally argue that it translates as ‘the road to destiny is through truth.’ It means that to find your destiny you must be true to yourself. First discover who you are then your destiny will be revealed.”

“How do I find out who I am?”

Francis laughed.

“Go out into the world and find out. You won’t discover who you are by remaining here.”

“But I like it here. I like learning from you. I feel safe.”

“None of us is safe – not in these times.”

Cedric examined the ring again. “How did you come across it?”

“When I was a novice training at the monastery near Norwich, I used to walk in the meadows where the old Roman city of Norvic once lay. One day I was strolling by a brook with my head full of all the questions that troubled me in those days, when my attention was caught by something glistening in the water. I bent down to investigate and this is what I found. I think it must be very old – it probably dates from the Roman occupation. Of course I told my Abbot but he said the ring had little value. He said I should keep it to remind myself of my chosen path.”

“Then you must keep it,” replied Cedric handing the ring back to Francis. “It’s rightfully yours.”

“I think it speaks to you more than to me David. Learning from the great books opens the world to those who study their meaning. But it also brings danger because it makes you different. Being different has always been - and will always be - a reason to be fearful. Take this as your talisman and I pray to God that he protects you.”

In the Summer months, when the days were longer and the sun shone brighter before it sunk each evening in the Western sky, Cedric was able to spend time alone walking by a tributary of the Fram. It skirted the base of Offa's Mount and joined the main river just outside the settlement. Usually he studied in the morning for three hours and then carried out his cleaning tasks till mid-afternoon. After that, he was free to spend his time as he wished.

The tributary ran through lightly wooded meadows. Small groves of willow and ash were interspersed with sunlit glades where shafts of light danced on mossy banks. The stream gurgled and splashed its way in between rocks and fallen branches as it hurried to join the main waterway.

Cedric found that walking alone in this peaceful wilderness helped him to make sense of the world. Francis's words to him 'first discover who you are and then your destiny will be revealed' had set his mind to work. Increasingly he felt alienated from the other young people in the village. Most young men of his age hunted and brought back wolves, rabbits, foxes and even the occasional bear to be skinned and then eaten. When they weren't hunting they were fighting each other or drinking a rough form of mead which often led to more fighting.

Cedric knew that he didn't fit easily with that life, though physically he was able to take care of himself. Days spent helping his father haul stones in the cart had endowed him with a muscular body and large hands. But the magic of Father Francis's books had opened a door to ideas and thoughts which would have been incomprehensible to him before and he knew the answers he sought lay outside the narrow confines of Frampton.

As he turned a corner one evening on his way back to the village, he was shaken by an angry squawk which appeared to come from his feet. Jumping back and looking down, he discovered that he had very nearly trodden on a duck which had been nesting in the grass. The duck was flapping its wings furiously and appeared to have an injured leg and so it could not escape. Cedric leant down and picked it up, clasping its wings in his hands to stop it struggling. The duck quickly realised that escape was futile so settled down to await its fate.

Cedric looked around to see if anyone owned the bird or if it was wild. He briefly thought of taking it back to Francis's house so they could both enjoy roast duck that evening. But the sound of other ducks calling out from nearby and the indignant response of his captive led him to venture further on. In the next woodland glade he came across the rest of the flock gathered around a small pool. They appeared to be unattended until he saw a girl about his own age standing back within the shadows of the trees. She was dressed in a simple coarse tunic and had long dark hair which was combed into a braid that hung down her back.

As he came into the glade, she retreated further into the shadows. He held out his captive duck, indicating that he wanted to return it to the rightful owner. Nervously, she came forward. Cedric smiled and held the now contented bird as far as his reach would allow. She leant forward and took it before retreating a couple of paces. Cedric smiled but held his position.

"I'm Cedric," he announced quietly. "I'm from the village. I help the priest – Father Francis."

She smiled and nodded, clearly understanding what he said. Then she lowered her eyes to the ground.

“What is your name?”

She looked up, her smile had disappeared. The question was as an unwelcome intrusion.

“I’m Martha,” she replied nervously.

“Do you live in these parts?”

“Yes. I live with my mother nearby. We look after these ducks. We sell the eggs and sometimes we sell the ducks.”

“Where is your father?”

“I have no father.”

Her eyes were again lowered and her shoulders drooped. Cedric guessed her father had perished in one of the Dane raids. He decided not to pursue the questioning further.

“I walk here often. I like the peace and the woodland. It helps me to think. Maybe I’ll see you another day?”

She smiled hesitantly and melted into the forest cover behind.

Cedric made his way back along the woodland paths and then the cart tracks that led across the heath to Frampton. As he approached, he noticed how much it was growing. New settlers had arrived and were building wooden houses on the outskirts. Each had to be approved by Aethelwulf and the owners were required to pay a modest tax to secure his protection. The new church in the centre of the settlement had attracted Christians fleeing the wrath of their pagan neighbours but with them had come disharmony. There was still a sizeable group of pagans who worshipped the old gods and were dismissive of this ‘Almighty God’ who held little regard for the warrior skills that had been handed down through generations.

When Cedric arrived back there was no sign of Francis. He eventually discovered him in the church praying in front of the alter. He was about to turn around and leave him to his private thoughts when Francis’s voice called out.

“Don’t go David. I need to talk to you. Come and join me here.”

Whilst Francis sat in Aethelwulf’s chair, still the only chair in the church, Cedric perched on a prayer cushion in front of the alter.

“I need to let you know David,” began Francis, “that there may be trouble brewing.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Those who believe in the old pagan gods are trying to reassert themselves. They have been entreating Aethelwulf – complaining that our Lord shows little sign of his love for them. They are calling for miracles to demonstrate his power.”

“And what does Aethelwulf say?”

“I fear he has a tendency to see their point. He has confided to me that as God’s appointed representative he has little to show for his devotion. And each day more Christians arrive. It makes the pagans more nervous. There is a rift developing and I fear we must consider the consequences.”

“What consequences?”

“If the pagans revive the worship of Woden and the other Norse gods, they will rekindle acts of savagery and cruelty. Woden is the god of death and war. He demands vengeance from those who desert him.”

In the days that followed, the sun shone brightly and the countryside was bathed in unfamiliar warmth. Cedric frequently walked along the paths which skirted the brook where he had met Martha - the duck girl. As he neared the pond where she reared her flock of ducks, he would feel his heartbeat quicken and a slight nervousness take hold of his body. On the occasions they met, she would invite him to sit with her on the mossy bank by the side of the pool. She dipped a flask into the brook and they would drink the cold water enjoying the subtle taste of heather and peat washed down from the heaths above.

Like many in these parts, her story was tragic and simple. She had been raised in a small settlement two miles outside Frampton. Three families all related and descended from the Icenii, inhabited one longhouse. They lived peaceably for generations until the arrival of invaders from the Norse countries in the late eighth century. They had managed to avoid capture by hiding in the forests. Twice their longhouse was burned down. But in AD 922 a Viking raiding party surprised the settlement by attacking from the woods and not from the river. The result was carnage. Most people were killed or enslaved. Her father was led away in chains and she hadn’t seen him since. Her mother was raped and left for dead. Martha hid and survived. When her mother recovered consciousness, she and Martha were the only ones left alive – destined to eke out an existence by whatever means were possible.

“What do you wish for?” asked Cedric as they lay beside the pool listening to the contented warbling of the ducks.

“I wish for nothing. What is the point?” she replied. “What matters is now – this very moment. There is nothing beyond that.”

Cedric stared at the cold water reflecting their faces back from the depths of the pool. He rippled the surface so that their images became entwined as one. Martha laughed.

“Did you know that there are old books which tell of an all-powerful god who loves us?”

“I know of Woden, but he is a cruel god. I do my best to avoid any involvement with him.”

“The god I’m talking of is called ‘The Almighty’. He preaches love and forgiveness in return for our faith in him.”

“Any god who preaches love and forgiveness round here will likely get himself killed. And maybe we’d all be better off for that.”

Cedric stared silently into the pool trying to make sense of the ideas that spun in his head. Life was about survival – he knew that. It was hard and brutal. But the old books told of other lives where people lived in peace and harmony – where learning and conversation were valued. It seemed so far away from the reality of his own life.

As the summer wore on, the vegetable plots and the meadows began to dry out. The turnips and the parsnips were withered and the cabbage was brown and infested with black fly. By mid-August it hadn’t rained for six weeks and the population of Frampton became nervous. Drought or flood was a constant worry and this year it seemed to be drought.

One afternoon, Aethelwulf sent his youngest son to fetch Francis to the toll house.

“What is your god going to do about this drought?” demanded Aethelwulf. “In other years we would have made sacrifices to Woden - a young virgin or cattle. But all you seem to do is say prayers. We need much stronger magic. What about all those miracles you told us about – feeding the multitude, healing the sick, raising the dead – we haven’t seen any of that since you came here. I’m telling you Father, my authority is being questioned and if that happens I will have to think again about my allegiance to your god.”

Francis breathed in deeply and weighed his response carefully.

“The Lord works in strange ways,” he began. “Sometimes we must suffer just as Jesus Christ suffered on the cross. But from that suffering comes hope and salvation. We learn new ways. We find new solutions. We become wiser people. The important thing is to have faith.”

“I will give you four days,” declared Aethelwulf. “If you and your god haven’t found a solution by then I will invite Woden into your church. There will be sacrificing and feasting to welcome our old god back. Four days Father – that’s all you have.”

That evening, as Francis and Cedric ate their evening meal in the church house, Francis was unusually quiet.

“What troubles you Father?” asked Cedric as he poured more mead into two goblets.

“It’s as I told you some days ago Cedric. The pagans are gaining influence. This drought is causing people to doubt our Lord. They want to see some gesture. They want to see his magic.”

He spat this out with a venom that Cedric had not witnessed before. He could see now that all the talk of miracles in the early days had raised expectations and obscured the true message of their religion. The Almighty was being tested and pitted against the ancient god Woden.

“I’ve been praying – asking for some sign, asking for

He paused

“A miracle?” offered Cedric.

“Yes – if you want,” shouted Francis in anger. “We need a bloody miracle.”

The next morning, Cedric set off early to the stream where he usually met Martha. He knew she wouldn't be there at this time. It was usually early afternoon that she drove her warbling flock along the track from their ramshackle house to the pond.

He soon encountered the dried up ditch which earlier in the year had been a babbling brook. The bottom was dried out with only small puddles surviving. The remains of dead fish lay on the dried mud. He followed the course of the brook towards the pond where Martha took her ducks for recreation. As he rounded a bend, he saw exactly what he remembered. The pool was still full of water even though the brook which fed it was dry. He knelt down and gazed into the water. It was alive with insects and small fish. Somehow the pond was being filled from another source. If he could find out how, it might provide the miracle that Francis needed.

He headed back up stream following the dried up river bed towards its source. As the woods began to thin, he saw Offa's Mount looming out of the haze, its steep eastern face bearing down on him. The dry river bed twisted and turned between boulders as it neared the foot of the rock. Suddenly, he was aware of the sound of running water. He scrambled over more boulders until he saw it – a torrent cascading between the rocks in a series of small waterfalls. He leant down and cupped his hands filling them with cold, clean water. The taste of heather and bracken cleansed his mouth and left a fresh, exhilarating feel.

But why was the water flowing here and not downstream? He followed the flow back down the water course and then the reason became clear. The entire brook disappeared into a swallow hole leaving the bed beyond that dry. It must be that the stream continued underground, feeding the duck pond without coming back to the surface.

He turned and followed the water upstream again, hoping to trace its source. Over the passage of time it had gouged out a narrow trough in the rocks which channelled water to the woodlands below. Above him loomed Offa's Mount casting a shadow across the land. He shuddered, remembering stories of whole communities that had thrown themselves onto these rocks. He imagined that the now clear water had then flowed red with blood as wolves picked at the rotting flesh.

Turning a corner he saw the source – fresh clean water cascading from a fissure in the rock. This is what he had hoped for. It was salvation for himself and Francis – proof that Almighty God did care and would provide for his people. Cedric ran to the water fall and stood under the torrent. He let the cool spray trickle down his face and run between his clothes and his body. He looked up at the sheer face of Offa's Mount. It seemed that this mysterious rock could preserve life as well as take it.

Later that afternoon, Francis called a meeting of his followers and ensured that Aethelwulf was positioned at the centre. He had been brought up to value the humility and piety of monastic life but taking a leaf from the bible, he knew there were times when theatre played a role.

Standing on a rock with his arms raised to the sky, Francis incanted

“The Great Almighty had heard the entreaties of his people which have been conveyed to him by his faithful disciple, Aethelwulf.”

Aethelwulf beamed with pleasure as his people looked on him with awe.

“The almighty has spoken to me in a dream and told me of a place where pure water gushes like a fountain from the rock.”

“Where is this place?” shouted someone from the onlookers. “We’ve seen no water for weeks.”

“It is indeed a miracle,” continued Francis. “I will take you there now and you will drink of the fresh water. You will quench the thirst of your cattle and poultry and revive the shrivelled vegetable plants that cry out for water.”

The crowd grew larger as word got round about a miracle. Sensing the opportunity to reimpose his authority, Francis seized his wooden cross and thrust it skywards shouting

“The Lord will reveal his miracle. Follow me.”

With that, he set off, hotly pursued by Aethelwulf and thirty or so villagers. He glanced nervously at Cedric who pointed the way. He realised now that he had placed his trust completely in him and quietly prayed that in his haste to please, Cedric hadn’t overestimated the extent of the miracle.

As the strange procession made its way to Offa’s Mount, there was much excitement and expectation amongst the followers. Some of the huntsmen had brought their horns which they sounded at intervals giving the whole spectacle a sense of celebration and pageantry.

As they approached the base of Offa’s Mount, Cedric led them away from the path which branched upwards and instead took them into dried scrub which surrounded the base of the Mount. Silence fell upon the party as it made its way slowly forward. This was not a place that villagers normally visited because it was known to harbour the spirits of those who had leapt or been thrown to their death from above.

Cedric paused and whispered to Francis. Francis held up his cross and spoke.

“Pray be silent. We are close to the site of God’s miracle. Listen and ye shall be saved.”

Everyone fell silent and listened. A light breeze rustled the undergrowth. Bees droned languidly as they searched for any remaining pollen. Wild eagles called to each other from the distance. But unmistakably, in the background, was the sound of running water. A cheer went up and people surged forward. Clambering over a ridge, the fissure came into sight, water pouring from a seemingly impenetrable rock face. It was indeed a miracle.