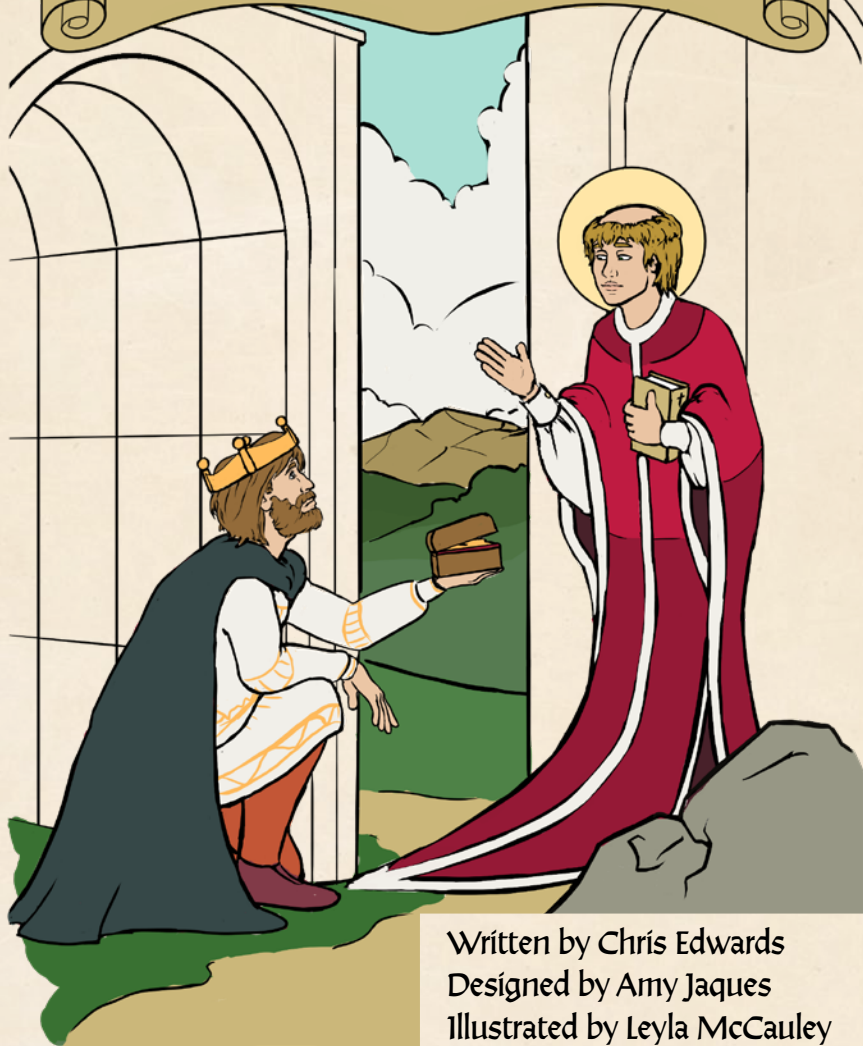


My Adventures with Athelstan



Written by Chris Edwards
Designed by Amy Jaques
Illustrated by Leyla McCauley



Everyone has heard of Alfred the Great, but his grandson, King Athelstan, was no less impressive. He was the first person to unite the Anglo-Saxons: in other words, he was the very first King of England.

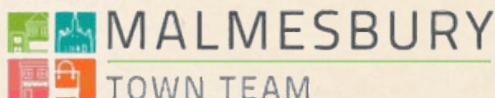
Discover how Athelstan came to be buried in Malmesbury, and learn more about his fascinating life story, from rejected prince to celebrated king, with a stunning victory in the biggest battle Britain had ever seen.

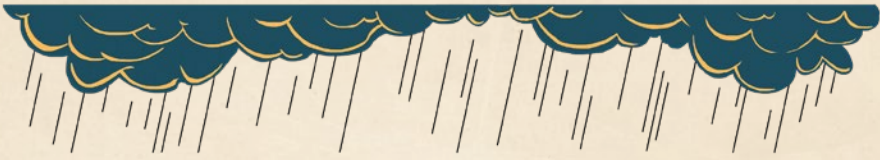
This narrative retelling of Athelstan's story comes from the mouth of his childhood friend and close advisor, Turketyl, who lent his name to Malmesbury's Truckle Bridge.

'My Adventures with Athelstan' was written and designed by Chris Edwards and Amy Jaques, with illustrations by Leyla McCauley. It has been produced as part of Athelstan 1100.

Cover Image: Athelstan kneeling, presenting gifts to St Cuthbert. Based on image from "Life of Saint Cuthbert"

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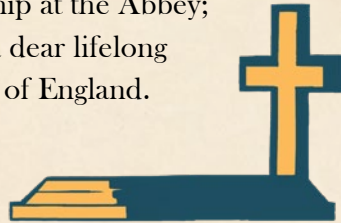


Visiting the Grave: 959 A.D.

My name is Turketyl, and I'm visiting Malmesbury for the first time in twenty years. This old market town has scarcely changed in all this time, but my body has! These days, I'm an old man, and walking through the great hilltop town of Malmesbury takes most of my strength.

Malmesbury is considered by many to be a place of holy significance. As an abbot myself, I know this well. Often, pilgrims will trace the same path I am now taking, towards the Abbey at the top of the hill. It was built by the great St Aldhelm some 270 years ago!


But I am not just visiting to worship at the Abbey; I've come here to visit the grave of a dear lifelong friend: Athelstan, the very first King of England.



The wind picks up as I walk higher. Rain has started to drum the cobbles.

It will slowly wash towards the River Avon, which surrounds three sides of the town. I smile when I see young children splashing around in the puddles, and I think back to my childhood in Mercia, when I was just as innocent. I made up games with Athelstan, hosted mock sword fights, and tried to beat him at chess.





Athelstan's Childhood

Athelstan was born in 894. Growing up, he didn't know his father very well. King Edward had taken a second wife, and suddenly Athelstan was an awkward reminder of the past. But his grandfather, Alfred the Great, doted on him. I fondly remember Alfred's smile.

One time, when we were very young, he put on a ceremony where he gifted Athelstan a beautiful scarlet cloak, a belt set with gems, and an ornate sword in a gilded scabbard. Athelstan danced around in the cloak for hours, showing it off, until he was told to be more careful. Then the artefacts were locked away somewhere safer! Athelstan was bright and quick-witted, and I think Alfred saw himself in the boy. At that time, Athelstan was quite silly, but he turned into a serious man. I think even then King Alfred understood, despite Athelstan's half brothers' claims to the throne, that Athelstan would be king one day.

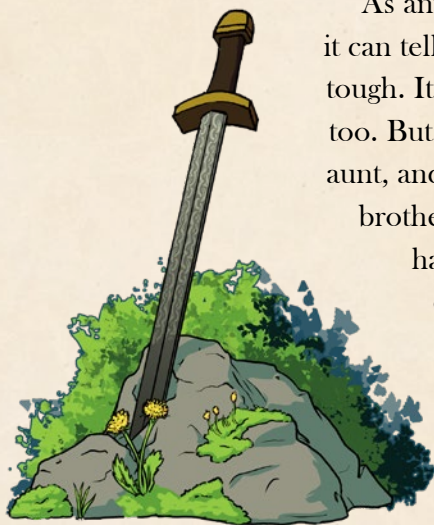
In 899, Alfred died. That was when everything changed. King Edward ascended to the throne and we celebrated with a banquet like we'd never seen before; dancers, hog's heads, and joyous music cast the evening in a warm glow. But Athelstan was sad. His favourite grandfather had died. What's more, he was going to be sent to live with his aunt in Mercia. I was going to move alongside him. Little did Athelstan know that he'd learn to love the kingdom of Mercia, and even be regarded by the Mercians as one of their own!

After that, he was raised by his aunt, a fearsome woman named Athelflad, Lady of the Mercians.


She took after her father Alfred, and was feared and respected by all of Mercia for her clever governance and military command. We were more scared of her wrath when we tried to steal biscuits!

Warrior Prince

As time passed, we grew into teenagers, and then into adults. Carefree days seemed to disappear into the past as we spent our days training to become proud swordsmen and scholars. In 917, Athelflad and King Edward had launched a great invasion into Danelaw, the Viking territory to the east of Wessex. Athelstan and I joined the fight, and we came back victorious, expanding Wessex and Mercia and banishing the Vikings to the North. But then, the following year, tragedy struck: Athelstan's aunt died!



As anyone who has experienced it can tell you, losing a guardian is tough. It was difficult for Athelstan, too. But he was proud of his aunt, and knew that she and her brother, the King of Wessex, had accomplished what once seemed impossible by driving the Vikings from the South.



King Edward then became king of both Wessex and Mercia, and joined Athelstan to fight the Vikings in Northumbria, battling forces from Dublin and York. For Athelstan, this was the first major period he'd ever spent with his father. He was nervous and more than a little resentful, but Athelstan was one of the most respectful people I have ever known. He was willing to put it all aside to prove himself as a warrior prince.

Athelstan Crowned

King Edward died in 924, and the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia fell into chaos. Athelstan was panicked. In Mercia, we championed him to become king, but in Wessex, to the south, they believed his younger brother Alfwear should take the throne. The threat was massive; if Wessex and Mercia split, we'd have a good chance of being overwhelmed by the Vikings! We quickly had to assemble an army, just in case Alfwear attacked Athelstan to become king. And sure enough, in no time at all, Alfwear was marching into Mercia to take Athelstan down.

But three weeks later, something unexpected happened. I don't suspect Athelstan of any foul play: I believe he just got lucky. Alfwear suddenly died! Perhaps it was an act of God, blessing the reign of Athelstan. Alfwear collapsed in Oxford, making Athelstan the undisputed heir to the throne of Wessex and Mercia. That said, it still took Athelstan a year to convince Wessex to agree! Plenty of people were still angry at him. In Winchester, one nobleman called Alfred even tried to make Athelstan blind! I don't think Athelstan ever forgave the city.

He was crowned by the archbishop of Canterbury, Athelm, in the autumn of 925. It was September, and most of the leaves had fallen from the trees. Still, it was bright. The sunlight split into rays through the branches, and it mimicked the radial crown Athelstan wore. Believe it or not, he was the first English king to be celebrated with a crown instead of a helmet! As the crown was placed on his head, he looked regal, with his golden locks catching the light.

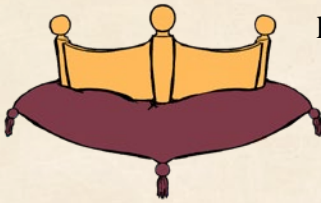
The ceremony was held at Kingston upon Thames, which, just like Malmesbury, was on the border between Mercia and Wessex. Being crowned there signified his dual governance. It seemed an impressive amount of power at the time, but Athelstan had set his sights much further. You could see it in his hard and serious stare.

His ultimate goal was to clear out the Vikings from Northumbria and establish, for the first time, a united Anglo-Saxon state: to create England.



The First King of England

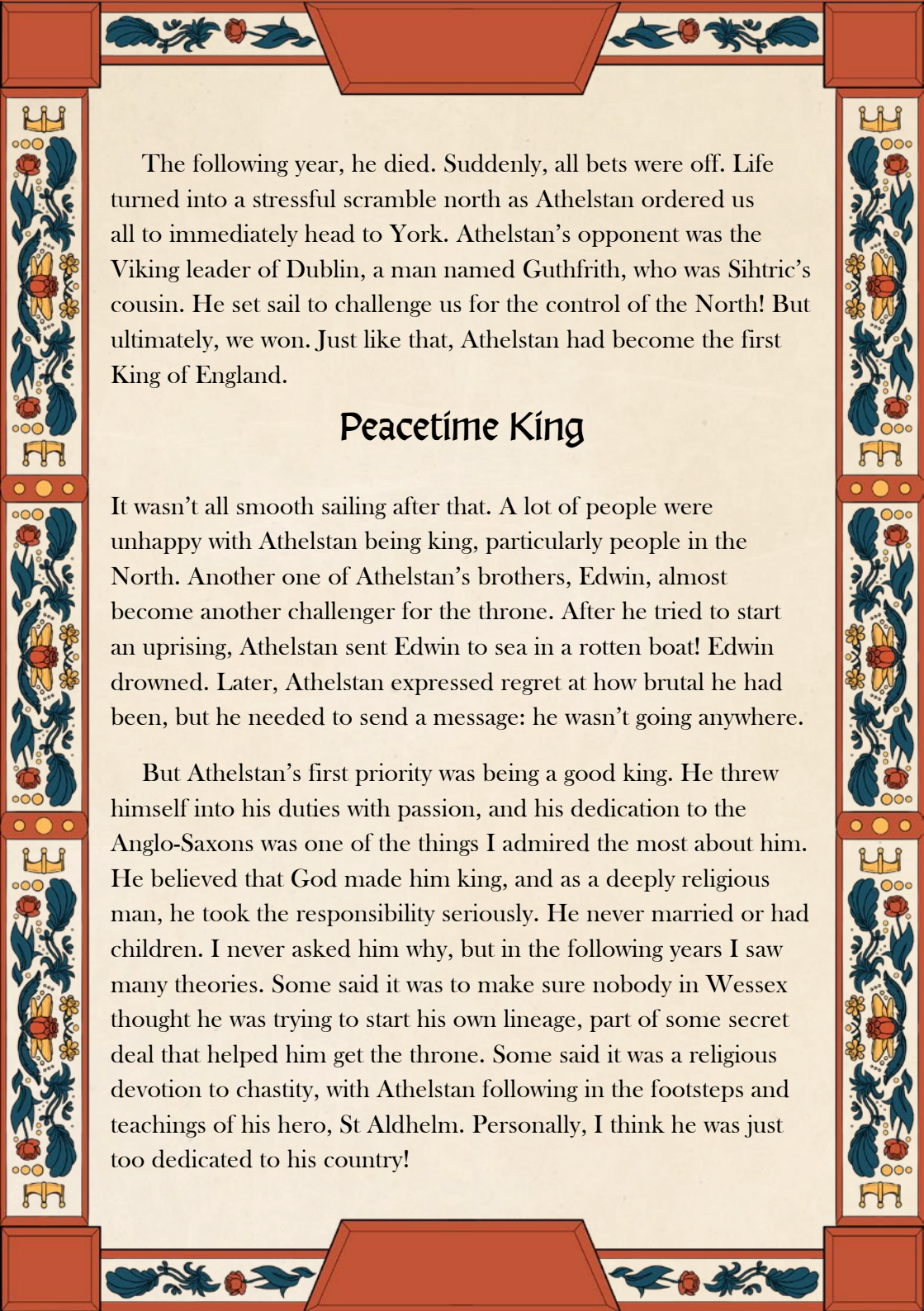
The Vikings at that time had two major strongholds; one in Dublin and one in York. The leader of the Vikings in York was a man named Sihtric. He was a fearsome man who had long been a thorn in King Edward's side. But with Edward dead, Sihtric wanted an end to the violence. Maybe, he thought, Athelstan would be receptive to a treaty of peace. It turned out, he was right!



You see, as much as Athelstan wanted to kick the Vikings from Britain, he also knew that without a special advantage, he'd be stuck in a stalemate. And he had only just ascended to the throne! He needed to make sure his reign was safe from threats, and that included the Vikings. So on one frosty January morning, Athelstan and Sihtric signed the treaty.

As part of this agreement, Athelstan's sister Edith agreed to be married to Sihtric. She was apprehensive about it, of course. Who wouldn't be? The Vikings had been our enemies for decades. She wasn't a Viking and might never be accepted by them. But, we all agreed, it would still be useful to have a trusted ally and friend in the heart of Viking territory.

Sihtric married Edith and returned north to York a married man... but not for long!




The following year, he died. Suddenly, all bets were off. Life turned into a stressful scramble north as Athelstan ordered us all to immediately head to York. Athelstan's opponent was the Viking leader of Dublin, a man named Guthfrith, who was Sihtric's cousin. He set sail to challenge us for the control of the North! But ultimately, we won. Just like that, Athelstan had become the first King of England.

Peacetime King

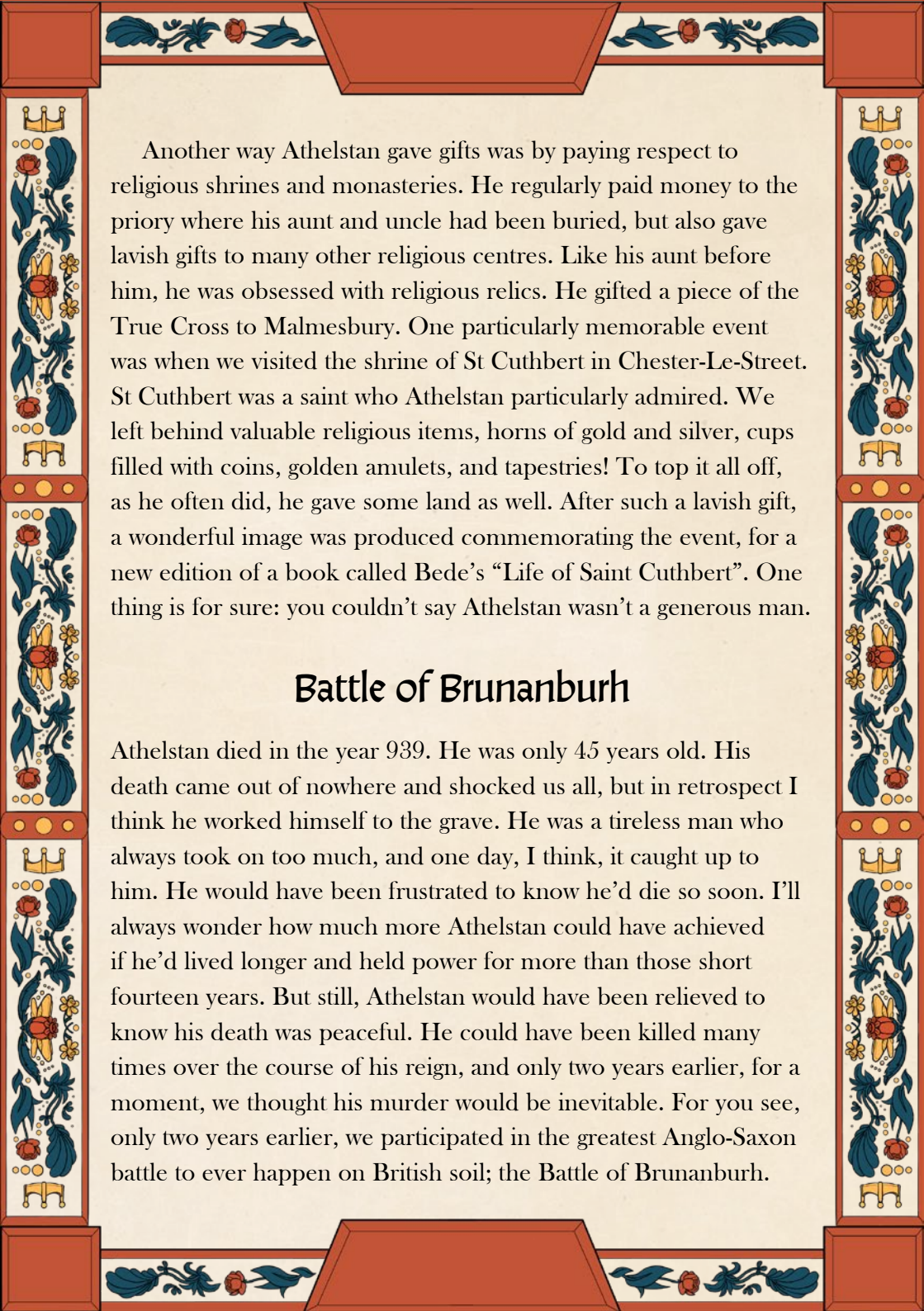
It wasn't all smooth sailing after that. A lot of people were unhappy with Athelstan being king, particularly people in the North. Another one of Athelstan's brothers, Edwin, almost become another challenger for the throne. After he tried to start an uprising, Athelstan sent Edwin to sea in a rotten boat! Edwin drowned. Later, Athelstan expressed regret at how brutal he had been, but he needed to send a message: he wasn't going anywhere.

But Athelstan's first priority was being a good king. He threw himself into his duties with passion, and his dedication to the Anglo-Saxons was one of the things I admired the most about him. He believed that God made him king, and as a deeply religious man, he took the responsibility seriously. He never married or had children. I never asked him why, but in the following years I saw many theories. Some said it was to make sure nobody in Wessex thought he was trying to start his own lineage, part of some secret deal that helped him get the throne. Some said it was a religious devotion to chastity, with Athelstan following in the footsteps and teachings of his hero, St Aldhelm. Personally, I think he was just too dedicated to his country!



After coming to power, he set about reforming the laws of his country. In the past, coins and laws had been issued from all over the land, but Athelstan wanted a central government who could organise England in a fairer way. I was one of his close advisors, helping to make sure his laws were passed and carried out. He passed a lot of them! After years of poverty and fighting, with many Viking raids, there were a lot of poor people. Many turned to theft, which was a massive issue. When Athelstan came to power, the law was that anyone caught stealing over twelve was put to death. Athelstan didn't think it was fair for such young people to be punished so harshly, so he later raised the age to fifteen. Perhaps the death penalty at fifteen isn't much better! Still, he was trying his best to help. He was always frustrated that he couldn't make bigger changes.




He created many charters to gift swathes of land to his people. I believe giving away land was Athelstan's way of being generous without getting tied up in extensive legal reforms. He gifted as much as 80 "hides" to Malmesbury Abbey alone; that's around thirteen square miles! On one bleak Christmas Eve, Athelstan turned to me, head in his hands. He said he cared so much for the poor and struggling in his country, but no matter what he did, it never seemed to be enough to turn the tide of poverty. Then, he thought back to the story of Jesus's birth. He realised that the answer had been in plain sight all along! Just as the people had offered Mary and Joseph food and shelter, so too could the people offer it to one another. We immediately set out to craft a charter that would offer land to a town in exchange for helping 120 destitute people every day. It may not have solved the issue, but it surely helped. Athelstan slept easily that night.



Another way Athelstan gave gifts was by paying respect to religious shrines and monasteries. He regularly paid money to the priory where his aunt and uncle had been buried, but also gave lavish gifts to many other religious centres. Like his aunt before him, he was obsessed with religious relics. He gifted a piece of the True Cross to Malmesbury. One particularly memorable event was when we visited the shrine of St Cuthbert in Chester-Le-Street. St Cuthbert was a saint who Athelstan particularly admired. We left behind valuable religious items, horns of gold and silver, cups filled with coins, golden amulets, and tapestries! To top it all off, as he often did, he gave some land as well. After such a lavish gift, a wonderful image was produced commemorating the event, for a new edition of a book called Bede's "Life of Saint Cuthbert". One thing is for sure: you couldn't say Athelstan wasn't a generous man.

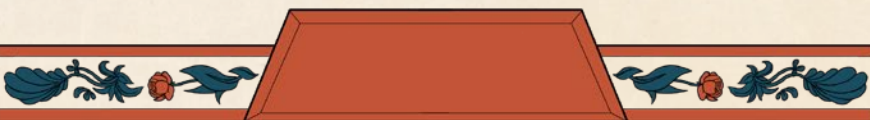
Battle of Brunanburh

Athelstan died in the year 939. He was only 45 years old. His death came out of nowhere and shocked us all, but in retrospect I think he worked himself to the grave. He was a tireless man who always took on too much, and one day, I think, it caught up to him. He would have been frustrated to know he'd die so soon. I'll always wonder how much more Athelstan could have achieved if he'd lived longer and held power for more than those short fourteen years. But still, Athelstan would have been relieved to know his death was peaceful. He could have been killed many times over the course of his reign, and only two years earlier, for a moment, we thought his murder would be inevitable. For you see, only two years earlier, we participated in the greatest Anglo-Saxon battle to ever happen on British soil; the Battle of Brunanburh.



When Athelstan had kicked the Vikings out of Northumbria, back in 927, a ceremony was held at a village called Eamont in Cumbria, just outside of Penrith, and further north from York. In attendance were the kings of Wales, Scotland, and Strathclyde (a kingdom that was sandwiched between Scotland and Northumbria). Athelstan knew that just because he had won the North, it didn't mean he would keep it. At any point, Scotland or Strathclyde could attempt to take the region for themselves, or incite a rebellion there. So we held a ceremony at Eamont Bridge, so the other kings would recognise Athelstan's overlordship of all of Britain; in effect, they'd leave him alone and not question his power. They agreed, because they'd seen how effectively we'd taken control of York. They weren't looking for a fight. It was the height of summer, and I looked out over the trickling Eamont river, smelling the scattered wildflowers across the bank, and I felt a deep sense of peace.

But seven years later, that peace was coming to an end. There had been grumbling from the northern kings, and King Constantine II of Scotland was refusing to follow all the terms of the treaty. So in 934, we amassed an army and headed into the North to challenge Constantine. Though we made it far into Scotland, the fighting ended in a stalemate, so we returned home, and for a little while, things were fine again. But behind our backs, it was another story. King Constantine and King Owain of Strathclyde were conspiring with the Viking king of Dublin, Olaf Guthfrithson, who had just come to power! He was angry about our defeat of his father in York seven years earlier. Those three kings didn't see eye to eye on everything, but they hated Athelstan more than they hated each other. So, they set about combining their forces to take Athelstan down, once and for all.



By 937, it was clear what was about to happen. Athelstan was nervous about the strength of his opponents' combined forces, and so we built up our own army, 100,000 men strong. In October, we met their armies in a place called Brunanburh. Edmund, another of Athelstan's brothers, fought alongside us. He and his brother Eadred had been infants when King Edward had died, so they had grown up in Athelstan's court.

Now, whether you believe this next part is up to you. But as an abbot, and a friend of Athelstan, I have to believe it! Athelstan told me that at Brunanburh, he prayed to God, and St Aldhelm of Malmesbury. Then, a miracle happened: Athelstan was given a sword by the saint! Ultimately, Athelstan led us to victory. The battle was so great that it will surely be remembered for generations



as the greatest battle ever seen. Our stunning victory showed the world that a united England wasn't just secure, but something worth fighting for.

But good things don't last. When Athelstan died on that fateful day in 939, I felt my stomach churn. Even if they hadn't been the ones to kill him, those kings had got what they wanted in the end: the death of Athelstan.

After Athelstan's death, England split apart once more. Edmund ascended to the throne, but Olaf Guthfrithson recaptured much of Northumbria and the East Midlands. King Edmund only reigned for seven years. He was able to gain back the lost territories, but then he died in a brawl! King Eadred was crowned in 946, and like his brother, had to fight for the control of Northumbria. But now, finally, England is united again. This time, I think it will stick.

Athelstan's Tomb, Malmesbury, 959 AD

It's draughty here in the church. I'm standing at the tomb of my beloved friend, King Athelstan. I know that he would be proud of his half brothers, and pleased that his dream of a united England was here to stay. In 948, I became the abbot of Crowland Abbey, and I'm sure that with our shared religious convictions, he would be proud of me, too.

Athelstan had chosen to be buried in Malmesbury, alongside his cousins who had died at Brunanburh. Many great men from Malmesbury had fought in the battle, and had been rewarded with land. Malmesbury is between Wessex and Mercia, which reminds me of where this all started. But more than that, Malmesbury was the home of the great St Aldhelm, Athelstan's hero, who had led him to victory in his final battle. Here, I know, Athelstan rests in peace. The downpour outside has stopped, and the afternoon is turning into sunset.



Athelstan 1100 is a community celebration and commemoration of the 1100th anniversary of Athelstan becoming King of England in 924 and his subsequent kingship. Led by the Malmesbury Town Team, participating community groups

include Athelstan Museum, Athelstan Players, Malmesbury Abbey, Malmesbury Civic Trust, Malmesbury History Society, Malmesbury Live Arts, the Warden and Freemen of Malmesbury and Malmesbury Town Council plus a large number of volunteers, with active involvement of students from Bath Spa University, Boom Satsuma, Bristol and the Centre of Enterprise, Design and Innovation at the University of Winchester.



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