

# Athelstan's *Dream*

Tales of daring deeds and mystical visions all feature in an exhibition at Milton Abbey about the legacy left by the Anglo-Saxons in this corner of Wessex

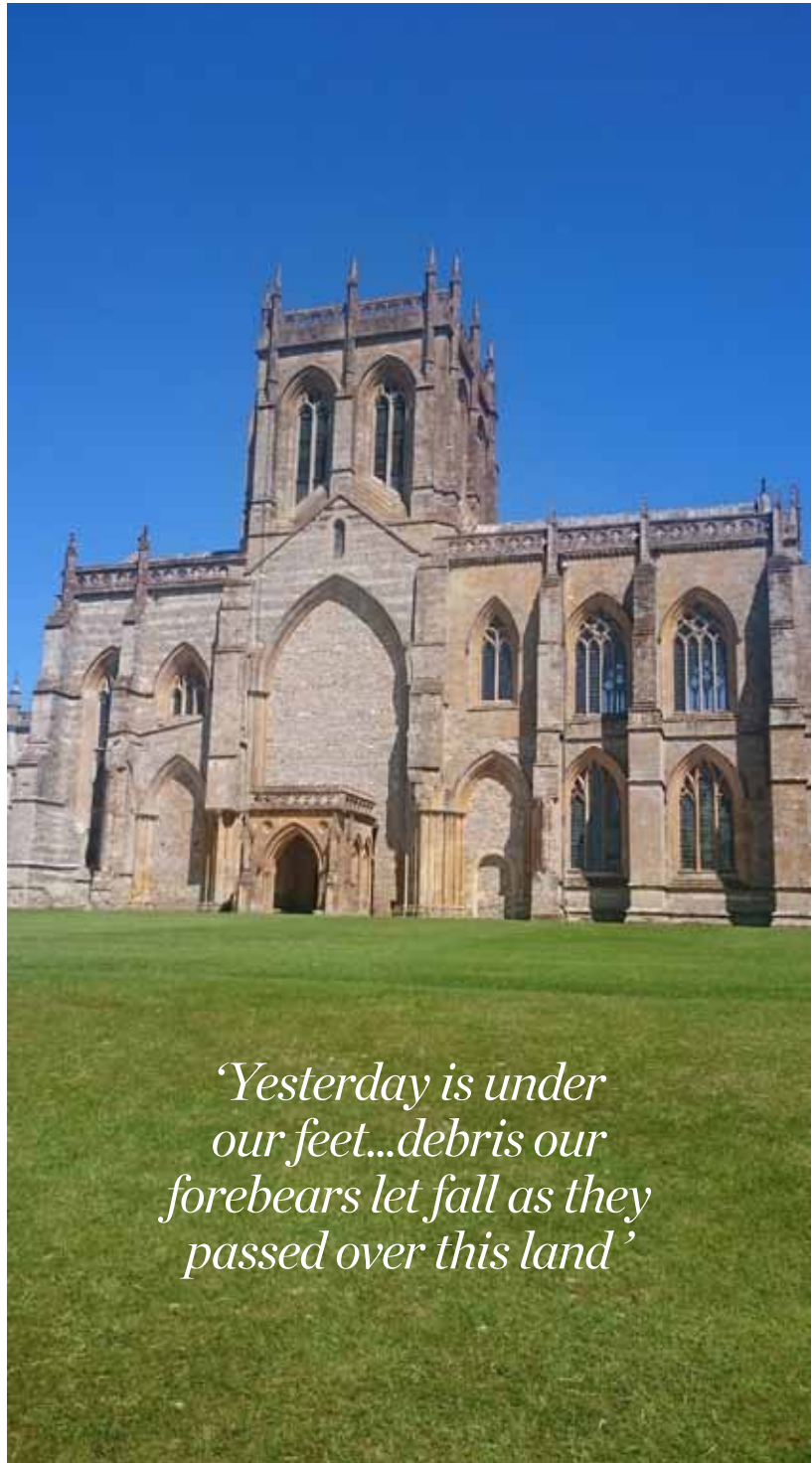
WORDS: Jane Adkins

Hands up – who hasn't caught an episode or two of George Martin's *Game of Thrones*? Or are you enthralled by the description of Middle Earth created by J R R Tolkien an Oxford Professor of Anglo Saxon history? More recently the television series *The Last Kingdom*, based on *The Saxon Stories* written by Bernard Cornwell, may have got you wondering about the portrayal of Alfred the Great and his descendants as Danes and Saxons battle it out in Wessex.

All these exciting stories were inspired by the Anglo-Saxons, and yet we don't really give credit to this fascinating period in our country's history. In his foreword to Brian Phillip's new book *Athelstan's Dream*, historian Peter Traskey points out that even the term 'Anglo-Saxon' usually causes eyes to glaze over. 'The successful Norman invasion leads us to ignore the defeated Anglo-Saxons, who seem more primitive by contrast than the Norman French – their language is difficult, their behaviour less sophisticated, their literature and culture limited, their time less worthy of attention.'

And yet nothing could be further from the truth, says Traskey: 'Even today 70 percent of our language is Anglo-Saxon in origin. If the Anglo-Saxons were warriors and skilled boat-builders, they also evolved a highly-developed practice of kingship and governance based on charters, grants and the wisdom of councillors. They established Christianity in the British Isles, built monasteries that were bastions of scholarship and education, relied on the inviolability of oath-taking, and revelled in abstract symbols and elaborate myths and legends. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle testifies to their reverence for recorded history.'

This is the inspiration behind a new Summer Exhibition - **Athelstan's Dream: A Saxon Tale** - at Milton Abbey. Set in a glorious Capability Brown landscape and surrounded by the countryside of north Dorset the Abbey is hosting this free exhibition (4 July to 31 August) which focuses on the Anglo-Saxons and the fulfilment of one man's dream to create a united kingdom of Britain.



*'Yesterday is under  
our feet...debris our  
forebears let fall as they  
passed over this land'*



**ABOVE:**  
Panel inside Milton Abbey showing Athelstan's mother, the first consort of his father Edward the Elder (son of King Alfred the Great)

**LEFT:**  
Milton Abbey - West Door

**RIGHT:**  
King Athelstan's gift of the abbey

**BELOW:**  
St Catherine's Chapel located just a little way from Milton Abbey is believed to be the location of the wooden building where Athelstan prayed for victory



In a story that resonates even today, King Athelstan dreamed and then achieved the unification of mainland Britain. The exhibition traces Athelstan's dream and the journey of this unification, and how Milton Abbey's heritage reveals the answer to so many questions surrounding the mysteries relating to King Athelstan, the grandson of King Alfred the Great.

According to legend Athelstan camped with his followers on the hill to the east of the Abbey, while sleeping under the stars he had a dream that he would prevail in a forthcoming battle against the Vikings and their allies who were seeking to conquer Mercia and Wessex. On his return from the battle he remembered his dream and founded a minstery at Milton in AD 934 in thanks for his victory.

Athelstan appointed bishops, gave grants to monasteries and breathed new life into the church after its depredations under the Vikings. As King he tried to give all his people safety, shelter and a Christian outlook: his charters stipulate that no one should starve, and that charity was a key responsibility of the church. He also set about reforming the administration of justice, control of the coinage, and the development of burhs. Athelstan died in Gloucester in 939AD at the age of 47 and is buried at Malmesbury, which is also home to the Athelstan Museum.

Thirty years later, in 964 King Edgar, impressed by the revival of monasticism in England, established a community of Benedictine monks at Milton Abbey under Abbot Cyneward. This monastic community continued its work of prayer and service for 575 years, until its dissolution in 1539.

As Bryan Phillips concludes in his book *Athelstan's Dream*: 'Yesterday is under our feet. History is an accumulation, a building up rather than a wearing down, and beneath the soles of our shoes lie the accumulated soils, stones, pot shards, buttons, buckles, coins, oyster shells, daggers, charcoals, tiles, harness pieces, torques, door latches, brooches, pieces of farm implements, odd forgings, and unidentifiable debris that our

## Ideal for young history fans...

Anglo-Saxons history is part of the school curriculum for seven to 11 year olds. The exhibition **Athelstan's Dream: A Saxon Tale** brings this fascinating period to life through a wide range of topics including:

Anglo-Saxon Life; The Age of Heroes; Weapons of War; The Warrior King; Landscape & Farming; Language; House & Home; Food & Drink; Clothing, Art & Jewellery; Transport & Trade; The Status of Women, Marriage & Children; Health & Hygiene; Anglo-Saxons in Literature; as well as the story of King Athelstan's dream.

**More at [miltonabbey.org](http://miltonabbey.org).**



forebears let fall as they passed over this land as we do now. See for instance, the carved stones of the original church at Milton Abbey and come to learn how we are really not so very different from our forebears after all.' ♦ ***Athelstan's Dream* by Bryan Phillips is on sale at Milton Abbey during the Summer Exhibition which runs until 31 August. Find more at [miltonabbey.org](http://miltonabbey.org).**