

Wednesfield

When the Anglo-Saxons first arrived in this island in the 5th Century AD, they came, not as Christians, but as pagans. The deities they brought with them survived for some 150 years before the concerted efforts of Roman and Irish missionaries drove them out.

Those ancient gods - Woden and Thunor, Tiw and Frige - now wander like ghosts through English folklore and the English landscape; largely forgotten, but distantly felt. It's unfortunate that all the literature we have from Anglo-Saxon times was set down in the Christian era, and the old gods were thus expunged from the written record.

Long after the Anglo-Saxon kings switched their allegiance to the god of the Christians, they claimed to be descended from Woden or Thunor. The old gods were thus downgraded to mere ancestors, albeit forebears with a fierce reputation.

Hang on, though. The old gods have not checked out completely. They are still present in our names for the days of week, and they are there in a surprising number of our placenames. Let's take the West Midlands, which lay in the kingdom of Mercia, the last of the Saxon kingdoms to convert to Christianity. Tiw, the old fertility god, is recalled in placenames like Tyseley and Tysoe, whilst in the Black Country two places (Wednesfield and Wednesbury) still pay allegiance to the god Woden, god of war and chief among the Saxon deities.

We may guess that the etymology of the words goes something like this. Wednesfield - or Woden's field - signified a clearing or area sacred to the god, while Wednesbury recalled a bury or hill dedicated to Woden.

The survival of these names, and particularly of Wednesfield, has always puzzled placename experts. Wednesfield, now a suburb to the north east of Wolverhampton, is only a stone's throw - if you can throw a stone 15 miles - from Lichfield. And Lichfield was once one of the powerhouses of medieval Christianity, site of a cathedral and the burial place of St Chad.

Why would they allow a place just down the road to retain its dedication to one of the pagan gods? In East Anglia, for example, another kingdom to convert to Christianity relatively late, there is not a single placename with a pagan origin. They must all have been re-branded.

One explanation is that the name was coined many centuries later, when the issue was not so sensitive. There is, after all, an area of Wolverhampton known as Danescourt, which was cooked up by antiquarian interest in anything to do with the Vikings.

But we can safely discard this idea. The earliest reference to Wednesfield goes back to the 990s, when it is named in the charter outlining the land granted to the Church by Wulfruna, after whom Wolverhampton takes its name. So Wednesfield is a bona fide Saxon name, at least.

But along comes another explanation. In August 910 a great battle was fought near Wolverhampton between the combined forces of Mercia and Wessex and the Northumbrians, who were in turn an alliance of Danes and northern English. The battle has been seen as one of the turning-points of history, a reversal of the tide of Danish conquest, and a signpost to a day when all of England would be united under the kingship of Wessex. The Northumbrians were heavily defeated, by the way.

We know the location of hardly any battle in this period, and the conflict of 910 is no exception. Nor are the surviving chroniclers much help. Some say that the battle was fought at Tettenhall; others that it was at Wednesfield; whilst others, hedging their bets, suggest that there were two battles in rapid succession, one in each place. There's even disagreement as to the year the fight took place, whether in 910 or 911.

We shouldn't despair at this just yet. Archaeological evidence of the battle may still turn up, as it did spectacularly in a field near Bloxwich only last year. And the Staffordshire Hoard is a great deal older than the 900s.

In the meantime, though, let us take a speculative punt.

A ferocious fight between Northumbrians, Mercians and West Saxons took place somewhere to the north of Wolverhampton in 910. Once the dust was settled, and the corpses of the slain stripped and disposed of, there was a need to give the battlefield a name.

The usual procedure - from the Middle Ages onwards - was to name it after the nearest significant place. That would probably be Tettenhall, the site of an ancient church and royal manor, and a couple of miles north of Wolverhampton. Indeed, re-enactments of the battle usually take place on the Lower Green at Tettenhall, though this might be because of its proximity to a pub...

But in fact the battle may have occurred further east than this, on the flat heathland close to the much smaller settlement of Wednesfield. Some of the contemporary sources certainly plump for this.

Anyway, once the dead were buried - if buried they were - in one or more of the tumuli that pepper the landscape around Low Hill, they named the plain where the fighting was at its fiercest after the ancient god of war, and called it Woden's Field.

And if the Bishop of Lichfield complained about an upsurge of Black Country paganism, they could always say it was purely symbolic.