

You
Wouldn't
Want to...

BE AN
ANGLO SAXON
PEASANT

Hardship,
hunger,
and humble
homes!



Written by Jacqueline Morley • Illustrated by David Antram

Village life

This is your village. There are about twenty wooden houses clustered around a much larger building, which is the great hall of the village overlord. The lord is a powerful warrior who leads a war band of loyal fighting men. These are high-ranking people, known as thanes. Ordinary villagers like you are ranked as ceorls (pronounced 'churls'). Apart from having to make certain payments to your lord, you are free to live as you wish – unlike some unlucky people in the village who are slaves.

Although ceorls are free, they haven't got many choices in life. They have to build their own houses with timber from the woods, and they have to grow crops and raise animals if they want to eat. You have no spare time to yourself as you spend all day helping your father with his cows and sheep, or working on his strips of land in the nearby fields.



House-frames are made of strong posts set into the ground, strengthened with cross-timbers. The walls are formed of wooden planks, or 'wattle and daub'. The roofs are thatched with straw.

Wattle and daub is made by weaving together small wooden branches, which are then plastered over with a mixture of mud, straw and pig dung. Plastering is not your favourite job!



The water you use is all carried up from the river. This has been your job ever since you were big enough to carry the buckets.



Your thatched roof is starting to show signs of age. A new layer of thatch on top will help. You carry up bundles of straw which your father fixes in place with 'staples' of bent sticks.

Most families have a vegetable patch near the house for growing leeks and beans, and a fenced-off area for pigs and poultry. When the pigs push down the fence you're the one who has to mend it.



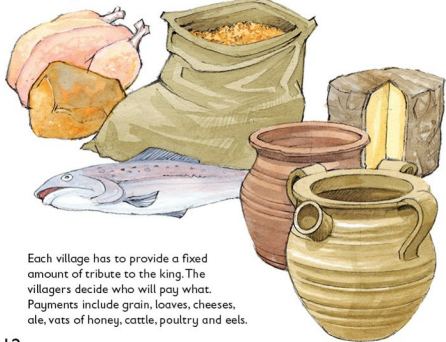
Handy hint

If your house is draughty, stuff the gaps between the planks with wads of sheep's wool.



Paying tribute to the king

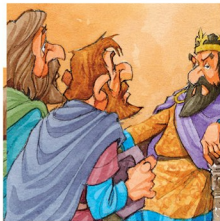
Your king is here with his war band. Throughout the year he travels around the villages in his kingdom, forcing the villagers to hand over their stored up food supplies and staying for as long as it takes to eat and drink the lot. The food or money collected from each village is known as a 'tribute', or tax. Thanks to these tributes, the king and his men live royally without doing any real work. But kings need to watch out. They'll only stay king as long as they're successful raiders. If they are defeated, their men will switch to a leader with more to offer. And not all kings are equal. There are many minor kings like yours, who must each pay tribute to the 'top king' – King Edwin, ruler of the whole of Northumbria.



Each village has to provide a fixed amount of tribute to the king. The villagers decide who will pay what. Payments include grain, loaves, cheeses, ale, vats of honey, cattle, poultry and eels.



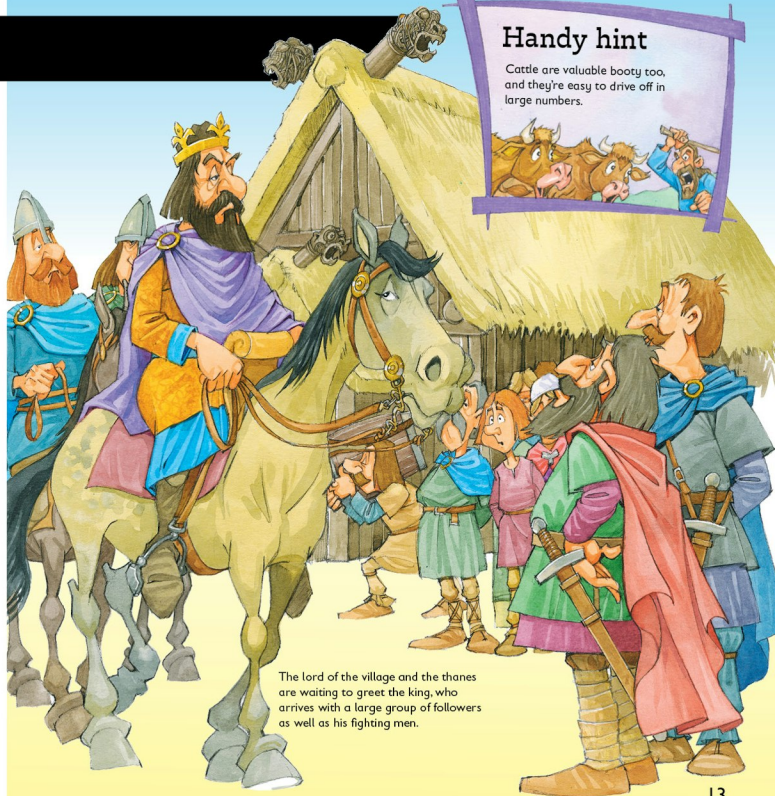
In a raid, the aim is to seize as much booty as possible from villages in other regions. Gold and silver objects are snatched up, and weapons and armour are stripped from the dead.



The king has business to attend to in the village. He judges important lawsuits, collects fines, checks on the work of his local officials and sorts out quarrels between rival thanes.

Handy hint

Cattle are valuable booty too, and they're easy to drive off in large numbers.



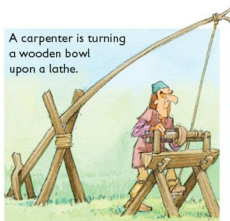
The lord of the village and the thanes are waiting to greet the king, who arrives with a large group of followers as well as his fighting men.

Going to market

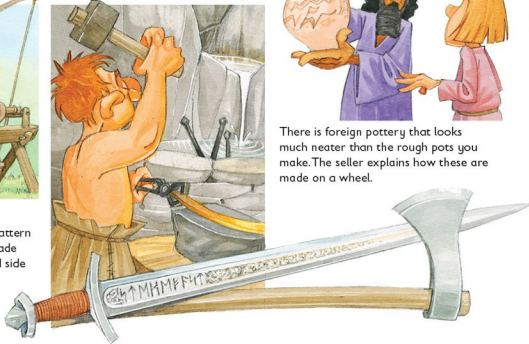
Many of the things you use every day are made at home. Most people in the village are able to make their own simple coiled pots, which they fire in the village kiln. They make the wooden parts of the tools they need and ask the local blacksmith to fit them with metal cutting edges. Travelling craftsmen sometimes come to the village selling things that need more skill to make, such as metal buckles and finely carved bone combs. But the latest way to buy really high quality things is to visit a market. These

are a new idea. Traders and craftsmen from neighbouring villages set up stalls together at some convenient spot where people gather regularly, such as a river crossing or an important crossroads. The stalls stay up for as long as the fine weather lasts, and people flock to the market to buy and sell. Your father has gone to the market hoping to get a good price for his calves. Your job is to keep an eye on them!

A carpenter is turning a wooden bowl upon a lathe.



A skilled blacksmith is creating a sword blade with a shimmering pattern running down it. The pattern is made from twisted rods of metal placed side by side and hammered together.

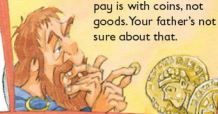


There is foreign pottery that looks much neater than the rough pots you make. The seller explains how these are made on a wheel.

You are amazed at the luxuries for sale: Frankish glass beakers and jewellery, bronze bows and beautiful silks from the Far East. Traders buy these at the coast from foreign merchants.

Handy hint

The smart new way to pay is with coins, not goods. Your father's not sure about that.

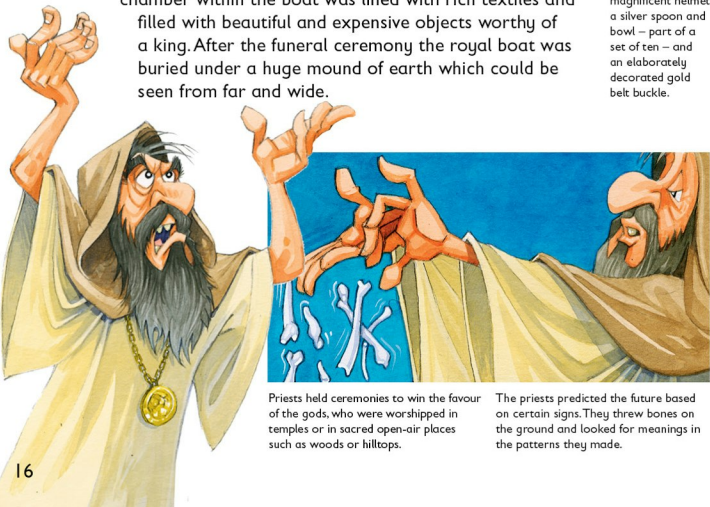


The old gods



Not long ago, your people worshipped the gods of their ancestors: Woden, king of the gods, Thunor the thunder god, Tiw the war god and a host of other lesser gods. Christian missionaries have taught the Northumbrians that these are false gods, yet the people in some Anglo-Saxon kingdoms still refuse to give up their old ways. Recently, an East Anglian king was given a pagan burial in great style, in a large boat that had been dragged onto land. A specially prepared chamber within the boat was lined with rich textiles and filled with beautiful and expensive objects worthy of a king. After the funeral ceremony the royal boat was buried under a huge mound of earth which could be seen from far and wide.

The King is buried with all kinds of impressive treasures, such as a magnificent helmet, a silver spoon and bowl – part of a set of ten – and an elaborately decorated gold belt buckle.



Priests held ceremonies to win the favour of the gods, who were worshipped in temples or in sacred open-air places such as woods or hilltops.

The priests predicted the future based on certain signs. They threw bones on the ground and looked for meanings in the patterns they made.



Handy hint

You can predict the future by watching the flight of birds (or so the pagan priests say).

