

# IN BRITAIN

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**SPECIAL ISSUE**

ROYAL BRITAIN IN SILVER  
JUBILEE YEAR



# THE VIKINGS ARE COMING

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*'878. In this year the Great Army went secretly in midwinter after Twelfth Night to Chippenham, and rode over Wessex and occupied it, and drove a great part of the inhabitants oversea, and reduced the greater part of the rest except Alfred the king; and he, with a small company, moved under difficulties through woods and into inaccessible places in the marshes . . .'*

*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

IT WAS a vision of horror butting through 1200 years of history. The great horns curved into the sky as you knew they would. For somehow you remembered. All you could see of the man's face were the eyes glittering in shadow behind the metal mask of the helmet. Matted blonde hair hung down over his shoulders. He was a huge man, shaggy with furs and dripping with chains. But standing there, battle-axe in one hand, drinking horn in the other, he seemed something other than man. A moloch out of the beginnings of time stood in Somerset.

He drained his drinking horn. Guinness, confided the moloch, tasted better in a horn. The exercise did not come cheap. The thing held a pint and a half and it was easy to forget that: but then inflation was one of the few things they did not have to worry about in the Dark Ages.

'Look dear,' said a grandmother to a child, holding him up so he might see, 'look at the funny man with horns.' The woman laughed, but the child began to howl, showing a superior sense of history. When such sights were common they too would have seen them from hiding, watched wild-eyed as the horned helmets strutted by.

In the pub the Vikings were drinking together. Near them were a small group of Cavaliers, one limping from a battle-wound. It was a strange sight. Anyone who would have come in would have thought himself in one of those time-warps beloved of television's science-fiction saga, Doctor Who. There were Highland pipers and Napoleonic officers and knights in chain mail.

England in summer seems to be

awash with private armies. Almost every weekend somewhere the Cavaliers in plume and lace will be swooping down on the Roundheads, knights will be charging each other in tournaments, and the Old Guard marching in column towards Wellington. But of all these, the Vikings, as they call themselves, or the Norse Film and Pageant Society, their official name, is the most bizarre.

It is the most popular medieval, or to be more accurate, Dark Age society in the country. Formed five years ago by eight friends, it now numbers 200 and is growing. Already it has associated chapters in Scandinavia and the United States. At Longleat in Wiltshire, as part of the Wessex Festival ('the first for 1000 years' the posters declared proudly) it was preparing to fight the last of Alfred's great battles against Guthrum's Danes.

Guthrum was Gerry East, a London transport director, the moloch in the horned helmet. With his long blonde hair and beard, and his weight (22 stone, his friends murmur, and a 56 inch chest) he really does look a Viking.

The armour worn by members of the society is astonishingly effective. East wore a version of what the Varangian Guards in Byzantium must have worn, a hammered metal breastplate, metal cuffs, a singlet glittering with metal pieces, and a great sheepskin cloak. He clanked as he walked. With his horned helmet he might have been Erik the Red or Harold Hardrada or Ragnar Lothbrok.

As Gerry East talked, these lines of Alcuin written in the 9th century come to mind. 'Out of the north an evil shall break upon the inhabitants of the land. It was not thought



Above. Three Vikings decked out for battle. Their clothes and armaments are authentic in style.

possible that such havoc should be made.'

But the society's members are keen to dispel such charges. The Vikings, they insist, have suffered from a bad press. All right, so they were rough boys, but they were not cruel like the Normans; the Vikings had a sense of fair play and democracy, and it was from them that the word 'law' passed into the English language.

They are also eager to make the point that they themselves are far from being hairy tearaways whose only aim in life is a weekly punch-up with axes. The society attempts to recreate life in the Dark Ages. They have built their own 30 foot longship, and their members have recreated Viking pottery and leatherwork. Most of their armour they make themselves, hammering out the wide swords and the helmets. All are based on the findings of archaeology.

The masked helmets are modelled on that found in the burial ship at Sutton Hoo. Some are even decorated with brass dragons turned up in old antique shops. 'We are reliving the past,' said East, 'but

what we are doing a lot of the time is putting into practice the theories based on research. In this way we can pass on quite a bit of practical advice to historians.

His own armour had cost him something in the region of £40. The only major departure was his string-mail shirt, made of thick knitted string because of the cost of chain-mail. Professional advice on swords and equipment had been sought from Scandinavian and English museums that specialise in the period of the Dark Ages. 'You'll often find that if you're really interested in something that people will take an interest in you. Anyway, we're doing something that most scholars have secretly wanted to do,' said East, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

His members range from barristers to businessmen to policemen. Their ages go from 18 to 70. They pay £3 a year for the privilege, for which they also receive the society's newsletter. The society is run as a military caste. New members are called 'Bondsmen'; for the first year they have no votes in proceedings until after this probationary period they are made up to 'Freemen' and are accepted. Above this are the society's officers, the Jomsviks, and Gerry East himself, ▶



Above. Re-enacting the Third Battle of Wessex. Right. Most of the masked helmets are made at home.

the Old Bear, leader of the society for the last three years.

Members give themselves new names to mark their re-birth as Vikings. East is Ragnar Odinson.

Others include Black Harry the Saracen (named because of his looks), the Ox, the Boar of Canterbury. When they meet, gripping each other by the forearm, they call each other by these names. Though the society is based in London, it has a number of regional branches known as Sveiters.

Because of the battle displays they put on for charity a great deal of attention is paid to weapon training. The society has a practice ground in Epping Forest where recruits are taught the techniques of sword, axe and shield play. When you consider that the weapons they use could kill or maim it is to their credit that no serious accident has occurred in the five years. Potential berserkers are weeded out in training. The battle at Longleat, not far from the original historical site, was the society's fifteenth muster of the year.

But their long-term aims are more intriguing. They are planning to buy a portion of scrubland and build on it their own long-house. It will serve as a centre for the arts and crafts of the society but also as a place where they can hold banquets and relive the boisterous life of the Viking hall. 'I think most of us do live in the



Dark Ages,' said Gerry Easton, 'especially when we're in the field of battle.'

Before the battle some 60 members of the society were being instructed in their roles. They had been divided into two groups: Saxons and Vikings, and were to meet in two battles, the last being Guthrum's last stand.

'Not too many deaths,' said a Viking. 'We need enough men for the last stand. Nobody is to kill Guthrum or his standard-bearer until the very end.'

'Can't we just maim them?' asked a voice wistfully.

Over a loudspeaker a member of the society narrated the event: Alfred burnt his cakes, was scolded by the old lady, and gathered his army. Time passed quickly. Then the narrator's voice said simply 'The Vikings are coming,' and a whisper went through the crowd. Under their raven banner Easton's men swaggered on. For a moment you relived the old horror.

The next half hour was filled with the swish of arrows and the ugly grating sound of sword-edge on sword. Axes crashed on shields. Men were hanged, literally drawn up on trestles, the rope attached to a special hidden harness. Huts were burnt and stage blood streaked the screaming faces. Then the last shield wall was beaten in and it was all over. Corpses littered the field ready for the plunderers and ravens.

Then to applause the corpse stood up and took a bow. Some how nobody had been hurt, even after the operators of a large siege catapult, wearying of firing bags of flour, slipped in a rock and lobbed it into the melee.

East lined them up in a long line of Vikings and Saxons. His blond beard streaked with fake blood, he informed the crowd that they had all seen a Dark Age battle. They would now see what it was like to be on the receiving end of a Dark Age charge.

It was terrifying. You saw the mouths open and the axes raised and then the awful thud of many feet running. They pulled up in time but already you had anticipated the shock. In the crowd faces looked startled. A child cried.

The next item, said the narrator, would be an actress reading love poetry from a boat in the lake. The Vikings began to drift away, picking up their arrows, trying to wipe away the blood. One limped. Slowly they were becoming barristers and businessmen again. The fires were put out.

On the lake the actress, quite forgotten, looked, bewildered, about her. The boat had slipped its moorings and was beginning to drift. Like the Lady of Shallot, she passed slowly along.

In the end she was rescued by a Highlander, while the Viking looked mockingly on. The Age of Chivalry, you remembered, was still 400 years into their future. ■