

Unearthing the Anglo Saxons

Anglo Saxon storyteller:

Come one, come all, come and hear some stories and riddles from long ago...

Anna Griffiths, County Collections Project Officer:

The purpose of 'History in the Making' is really to take some of our county's collections and take them back out into the community, where different groups of people can engage with them.

For the past few months we've been looking at some of our Anglo Saxon archaeology. Some of these objects were excavated from gravesites around the county, in places like West Hendred and Watchfield and we've been taking some of these really wonderful items – items of jewellery, items that people were buried with, such as swords – and we've been taking these out to different groups in the community and our Learning and Engagement team have done work with day centres, with schools, and we've been working with artists and storytellers to inspire their own creative responses.

Children from Watchfield Primary School:

'Return of the Dragon'

People on a journey saw a dragon...

The dragons had been cooking some fish in a cooking pot...

A very fat, hungry thief, who smelt the cooking...

The dragons had been offended by this outburst, and so they blasted the thief with fire...

Anglo Saxon storyteller:

...and angrier still grew the dragon. Again he fell upon the two men and this time Beowulf, he brought down his sword so hard upon the dragon's skull, it broke it...

Anna Griffiths, County Collections Project Officer:

A lot of the collections that we've been focussing on are man-made objects that show traditional crafts in the area, and we're using these to inspire new art; to investigate how some of these traditional crafts have continued.

One of the star objects on display is going to be an Anglo Saxon, pattern-welded sword that was found in Watchfield.

David Moon, Curator of Archaeology:

The sword itself comes from a specific burial, it comes from the burial of one individual, who had a lot of other stuff buried with him as well. He had knives, a cauldron, a shield and things like that, and the collection together of that entire grave tells us that it must have been somebody who was really important. Because it was a valuable item, it was an expensive item and it was a rare item, and it was an item of prestige and power, and so firstly to bury it with somebody and take it out of circulation is a really significant move. It says a lot about the people who performed the burial really, rather than the person it's actually buried with - that the people who actually dug the hole in the ground and put the stuff in there felt that this person was worthy of taking this really valuable item away and it never being seen again.

The sword demonstrated a position of power, because they were so valuable. Some of the swords are given values in some of the texts, as being equivalent to 120 oxen, so you've really got to consider this sword – it's like the Ferrari of its age.

Anna Griffiths, County Collections Project Officer:

We've commissioned a blacksmith who's going to use that original sword as a template, and what we've also done is invite a local blacksmith to join him as an apprentice.

David Joy, Blacksmith:

My name's David Joy and I'm an artist blacksmith, which is a combination of the traditional craft of blacksmithing and also an artist designing specific works for customers.

Stuart Makin, Blacksmith:

My name's Stuart Makin and I'm a blacksmith. I produce objects out of steel or iron or other metals that have been forged hot in a fire.

David Moon, Curator of Archaeology:

It's wonderful to have the original sword, this thing that has been in the ground for 1500 years and was so important to the people who made it, but you don't get the full impression of what it was like when it was new and when it was revered from this rusty piece of metal.

So what we want to have is something that 'gleams like fire' as they say in the literature – something which is shiny and bright and looks like a high-status, wonderful item, which it is.

Swords were objects of practical purpose. They were used in battle, and we have accounts of them being used in battle. Success in battle empowered the sword and empowered its user. They were given as gifts; you could earn one by great deeds; you could inherit one if you were born to a suitable family; or, you could be given one by a sponsor and it would tie you – the ownership of the sword would tie you to a king or to a warlord.

There's a link, of course, with this sword to Waylands Smithy. Waylands Smithy is not an Anglo Saxon site, but it's an Anglo Saxon name. Wayland the Smith was a legendary blacksmith, and some of these sorts of pattern-welded swords that passed into history were believed to have been made by Wayland the Smith himself – the legendary smith of the gods.

David Joy, Blacksmith:

Pattern-welding is the taking of two different kinds of metal and forge-welding them together, or basically sticking them together so that at the end of the process you can see the two different kinds of metal in the layers.

Smithing is the manipulation of metals really, so goldsmithing or silversmithing. The name blacksmithing derives from the black oxide layer that forms on iron or steel when you put it into a fire to forge it.

Stuart Makin, Blacksmith:

It was interesting going down to see the sword at the Resource Centre, and when David and I looked at it in conjunction with the material that the museum provided we discovered a lot about the size, the shape, and the construction of the sword – so how it was put together, the type of pattern in the pattern-weld, things like that, and the materials used as well.

David Moon, Curator of Archaeology:

So it was found just outside the town of Watchfield. There's a ridge that runs along there and on that ridge was an Anglo Saxon cemetery, and that was discovered in 1983 during the construction of the Shrivenham By-pass.

Stuart Makin, Blacksmith:

Forging of steel is exactly the same – we've still got anvils, we've still got hammers, you still need a fire to heat it up and move it – however, now as opposed to 5th or 6th century we've got mechanisation. We've got electric fans to run the forges, we've got power machinery,

like hammers and things like that, which takes a lot of strain off the smith involved and also removes a lot of human error. I can make this sword by myself – I've got a power hammer and I don't need four or five guys with sledgehammers to do the work.

David Joy, Blacksmith:

I'm sure the basic techniques haven't changed for about 2000 years, so the very fundamentals of blacksmithing. I think the thing that has changed is the application. Now, broadly speaking, it's artistic or commission work or farriers shoeing horses. Whereas traditionally, for hundreds of years the blacksmith would have made all the tools and all the craft tools for a village, so they would have been the base starting point for the tools in a community.

Stuart Makin, Blacksmith:

An apprentice to a blacksmith or even a blade-smith is going to be a highly sought after profession. These are people that are very, very valued for their skills, so an apprentice is going to have to show a certain degree of willingness and they might have been cases where parents would give up children to a master-smith to become apprentices.

David Joy, Blacksmith:

I'm sure it would have involved a lot of time just doing the most basic tasks for a blacksmith, so tending the fire and watching the blacksmith as he worked the metal.

Stuart Makin, Blacksmith:

And the master-smith would be responsible for the health, feeding and looking after of the apprentice. In return he gets a lot of free labour for quite a long time. The return for the apprentice is that in several years' time he's going to become a smith himself and can literally name his price on things.

David Joy, Blacksmith:

It was very hard work, but extremely enjoyable. I learned an awful lot whilst working with Stuart. I think the talent and skills of smiths of that era is really staggering. I'm really pleased to have been able to take part in making this final piece. It's a spectacular item now it's finished.