

SUNDAY EXPRESS

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magazine



COUNTRYSIDE

Cookery

Recipes & Remedies
tested by time:
first instalment

SUNDAY EXPRESS
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WHERE ALFRED BURNT THE CAKES

Robert Temple discovers a backwater in Somerset where not much has changed since Alfred the Great hid there.

Pictures by Dave Johnson

WHEN the Danes overran England in 878AD the only unconquered patch was a few square miles of impenetrable willow and alder marshes in Somerset. In this so-called "Isle of Athelney", where some bits of hard ground rose from the mists, King Alfred took refuge. The mists still swirl across the willow beds of Athelney, and today Stan Dare, the West Country's last hurdle-maker, still weaves the young stalks or withies there into a pattern even older than Alfred. It matches one found in excavations of 6,000-year-old hurdle tracks under the peat of neighbouring Sedgemoor.

Athelney, about ten miles south-east of Bridgwater, remains stuck in the past. The last of its pre-Norman cob cottages, with mud walls 14 inches thick, was demolished last summer. Ancient traditions of barter continue. Stan Dare, like many of his neighbours, grows large quantities of vegetables "to give to friends", who grow other kinds to give to him. He makes a modest 180 gallons of cider a year to see him—and friends who call at his withy shed—through the bleak winter evenings.

"It makes 'em see double and feel single," he says.

Locals talk freely of King Alfred, as though he had passed through the other day. "We have lots of Alfreds round here," said Harold Meade, a retired pub-keeper, "all named after King Alfred". They also have an ancient rustic table hewn from a huge tree stump and known as King Alfred's Table, a pub called the King Alfred, and nearby earthworks called King Alfred's Fort.

It was while sheltering in a cottage in Athelney that the king let the cakes burn, as he used to recount to his court in later years. The housewife had asked him to watch over the cakes in the oven and she scolded him on her return, remarking that he would be quite happy to eat her cakes but couldn't be bothered to mind them. She didn't know he was the king.

A stone monument, erected in 1801, commemorates Alfred on Athelney Farm. It stands on the site of the Athelney Monastery, which the king founded after he'd emerged to defeat the Danes and regain his kingdom. Fred Morgan,

the farmer, continually ploughs up oyster shells and wrought stone-work from the monastery and piles them by his kitchen door. Better pieces he keeps indoors.

"There's always been a house here on the spot where my farmhouse stands, on the south side of the hill, protected. King Alfred built the causeway, the road runs along from East Lyng. The tides came up all around then, and he could only come along a causeway if he wanted to get in here."

Someone who seems to have all the secrets is Harold Hembrow, who hasn't the slightest hesitation in wading down into the river mud to catch elvers. They are baby eels, caught about February "when they be a-crawlin' thick". They have to be caught at night, so that an Athelney man will "sleep by day and be out all night, elvering," as Hembrow puts it. He and his brother Albert once caught 150 pounds of elvers in an hour.

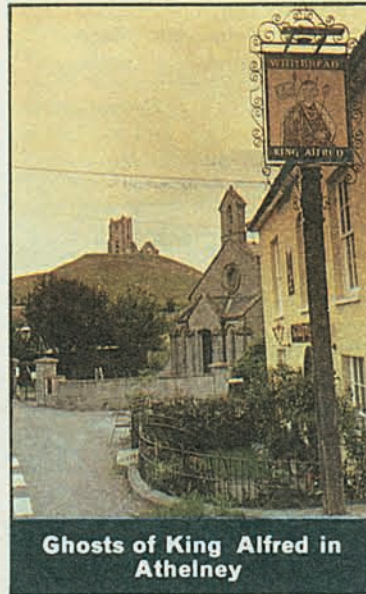
Elver nets come in two kinds: the Bristol net, which is used but looked on as a suspicious foreign import, and the local nets, which are made by Harold Meade, based on two bent withies crossing each other at right angles. "An elver is the size of a knitting needle and the length of a matchstick," says Meade. But by the time the conversation turns frolicsome, the elvers have grown to five feet long and are jumping up the river banks and biting the hands of the fishermen. "Elver omelettes are only lightly browned," says Norah Meade, "else it ruins the flavour."

Stan Dare talks knowledgeably about his withie: "When it's really hot they can grow one and half inches a day, and then if it get a bit cold they might not grow at all for a blinkin' week."

He can make six hurdles 6ft high and 6ft wide in a day. When he works, on a frame he designed and built himself out of simple materials, his hands are a blur with their rapid weaving.

Children used to spend the afternoon stripping the withies with their parents. "They'd get sixpence a bundle," says Athelney's oldest inhabitant, Mrs Rose Tottle. Aged 97, she lives alone with her cat Twinkle and still cooks her own meals. She says: "I believe a woman needs to keep the responsibility of supervising her household."

Mrs Tottle was taught to milk at the age of ten and had to do it every day. Her father earned 12s 6d. a week as a farm labourer. They rarely ate meat. On a Saturday her brother would be sent into Bridgwater to buy a rabbit for sixpence and her mother would make a stew of it for Sunday lunch, with doughboys and a little bacon in it if she had any. The rest of the week they lived on cabbage.



Ghosts of King Alfred in Athelney



Harold Hembrow, who knows all the secrets of catching elvers and eels. The Bristol net, left, is looked upon as a suspicious foreign import. Harold Meade makes nets with withies (right). Full grown eels are caught in a pounding net, centre left, and trapped in the eel trap, centre right.



George Bawden (top), Harold Hembrow and willow boiler



Stan Dare has designed his own frame to weave hurdles from withies—willow branches. He can make six in a day



Harold Meade makes mead from honey his bees produce



Len Meade is said to make the finest log baskets in Somerset

broth. If she could get a little fat she would fry the children little pieces of pastry of plain flour.

Mrs Tottle speaks with incredulity of people today: "They'd as soon buy foreign apples as English! There's too much money today. In years gone by, there was no money and people had to make their own happiness, and care for others.

"Today people don't care about others and if they have children they don't have to work to feed them, they just get a cheque from Taunton Security."

One of Athelney's social hubs is the Old King's Head, where Harold and Norah Meade, though retired, still welcome everyone who cares to drop in to tea. Every afternoon the postman Ken Ashworth stops for his cuppa, passes along the news from the route, together with any verbal messages. He likes to recount how his uncle could roll two cigarettes at once, one with each hand. And a friend would lay snuff along his arm like a trail of gunpowder and sniff it all up at one go. "Sniff it all up in one go from both arms at once, Ken?" teases Harold Meade. "Well, could've been"—tales here have a way of growing in the telling.

Till recently the Meades' house was a unique pub without a bar or cash register. Now the great nine foot-high cider barrels are empty in the barn. The pub only served homemade cider and local beer, and customers helped themselves



Mrs Rose Tottle, aged 97, is Athelney's oldest inhabitant

to it and left money in a box if they could afford to. They could also wander about the house if they wanted to. There never was a pub sign, so some old customers who come visiting from "outside" still turn up wanting to relax on the enormous settle and engage again in the localsport of "cider wallopin". The usual way to do this is with a series of seven or eight pints of "mixed"—half of "old" and half of "mild" (Athelney language for dry and sweet).

Cider must be walloped in a china mug—glass spoils the taste. "Pints of mixed" are then walloped back by the thirsty toper. The Meades now only oblige friends and never charge. Harold Meade "keeps a bee or two", producing honey from the willow blossoms, and from it he makes mead, the better one being the dry, "dry because it is older, just like I get drier the older I get," he says.

Len Meade, brother of Harold,

lives nearby and sits for hours basket-making in his garage. He is said to make the finest log-baskets in Somerset. Len is constantly grafting rare apples, which he tries to save from extinction by collecting cuttings from everywhere he can. One of his recent prizes is a rare apple called the "Rattler" which makes a noise like a rattlesnake if shaken when ripe.

Len still has an old bird-net and explains: "When I was a boy if you couldn't catch a thrush or a blackbird you might have nothing to eat. Two of you would go out at night, one would shake the hedge-row and the other would stand the other side with the big bird net open to catch what flew out." Sometimes you have to be just as wary living at Athelney as a sleeping bird. "You need three eyes to live here," says Len, "one in the back of your head to see what people are doing and saying behind your back."

Harold Hembrow agrees that life in Athelney is less than idyllic: "Oh, 'tis a wicked place. Near everyone be carryin' on with near everyone else here. It's true what Leonard say, ye do need three eyes." He has had over £1,000 in cash stolen from his house under a year. As Harold Meade says: "They'll whip the sugar out of your tea today."

But life goes on much the same. The withies are cut, starting at the fall of leaf, when the sap goes

down. George Bawden boils them in the last functioning coal-fired willow boiler in the country. Hembrow, his back completely gone and standing up only by the strength of a steel corset, will spend months going through the withy beds cutting them into bundles faster than the eye can see, a master of a trade older than the monarchy or even the English language (which in any case is nearly Elizabethan at Athelney). Withies now fetch £12 a bundle.

When the mists rise up in the morning, the few pieces of high ground still show above them as the islands they were when King Alfred fled to them through the swamps. On such a day, when the morning sun strikes the ruined church atop the "Mump" and makes it gleam against a soft grey cloud, as the beams of light stream through the silvery willows, and as the tidal current of the river rushes past faster than a hare can run, gurgling like a man choking on cider, you can feel the supernatural power of a place that lives entirely to itself.

The ghosts of all the dead of Athelney are lurking sadly in the withy beds, where the living with their hoes and sickles go to seek them. And there, the living and the dead become one among the endless thickets of willows, joining to make the spirit of that place which is Athelney, coming together as its ageless dream. ●