



FOR CRYING

OUT LOUD!

The Story of the Town Crier
and Bellman, Past and Present

by David Mitchell

Town Crier to the historic city of Chester

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1

DISTANT ECHOES

Even in my lifetime England has suffered ignominious defeats. I shudder, for example, to recall the moment we lost on penalties to Germany in the semi-finals of the 1990 World Cup, when Chris Waddle ballooned the ball over the bar. In earlier times his life would not have been so readily spared. But perhaps England's most disastrous defeat – and certainly the one with the most far-reaching consequences for the history of town crying – was the home defeat against the little-fancied Norman-French side at Hastings in 1066. Of course we wouldn't have lost at all if the Normans hadn't cheated. We were enjoying by far the better of the early exchanges until the devious French striker, William, stuck his elbow into our skipper's eye (some translations render 'elbow' figuratively as 'arrow').

Defeat was bad enough, but far worse was that the French didn't go back home after the match. Camembert and garlic quickly spread across our hitherto green and pleasant land. And thus it was that from 1066 the words 'Oyez . . . OYEZ! . . . OYEZ!' began to be heard within these shores. It is a strange but common phenomenon. We meet someone who doesn't speak our language so we think we can *make* him understand by repeating the same unfamiliar words louder and louder: 'Oyez . . . OYEZ! . . . OYEZ!'

So we can certainly trace back to our French conquerors the three Oyez's (the Norman-French equivalent of 'Hearken') which traditionally preface every proclamation. But that's as far as I'm prepared to go. There is a parallel claim often made for William the Conqueror that I want to contest. Several popular history books state that William introduced town criers into England in the wake of his conquest. The story goes that he appointed criers to travel

FOR CRYING OUT LOUD!

throughout the land, announcing his victory and proclaiming his laws.

Let me ask you, *mon ami*, does this stand to reason? Is it at all plausible? We had already been resourcefully innovative before 1066. We had long since built Stonehenge, carved white horses into chalk hillsides, created exquisite illuminated manuscripts, and learnt to make manuscript ink by mixing powdered oak galls with monks' urine. With this level of native ingenuity, would we really have needed a bunch of foreigners with odd pronunciation to come over here to say, 'Av yoo nevere sort ov avving sumone stand in ze market skware and shout ze news to ze people wen zay ar all gazzairred togezsaire in won pless?' After all, other civilisations had fastened onto this blindingly-obvious procedure centuries previously, as we will shortly discover.



2. Bayeux Tapestry out-take

Before finally dismissing the claim that William the Conqueror introduced criers to Britain, we must first address the conclusion sometimes wrongly drawn from the Bayeux Tapestry. It is true that two bellmen are indeed to be seen on the tapestry which so vividly depicts the Conquest. However, the evidence proves precisely the opposite of what is often claimed. The scene in

which bellmen appear is one which depicts Britain *prior* to the Norman invasion. The body of Edward the Confessor, on a richly-decorated bier, is being carried to his final resting place, the Church of St Peter, in January 1066, ten months before the Battle of Hastings. The two bellmen are accompanying the funeral procession. The legitimate conclusion to be drawn, therefore, is that the tradition of bellmen accompanying funeral processions was already well-established in Britain *before* the Conquest.



3. Two bellmen accompany the funeral procession of Edward the Confessor



13

ASK ME ANOTHER!

From the very first moment that you put on the outfit, or ‘livery’ as it is more correctly called, and hit the streets as a town crier, you notice that people’s reactions to you change dramatically. The appearance of a town crier seems to say to people that you are approachable, that you are happy to be photographed with them, and that you will probably know the answer to any question they may ask.

I anticipated that, as town crier to such an historic city, the questions would largely be about Chester’s history. The reality is quite different. Questions about history are rare. Tourists’ needs are more practical and immediate: ‘Where can I find a bank?’, ‘Where are the toilets?’, ‘Where do you recommend for lunch?’ and ‘Where is Lakeland Plastics?’ are the recurring questions that account for 95 per cent of all enquiries.

Children, of course, ask, ‘Are you a pirate?’ or, more memorably, ‘Were you alive once?’ But the surprising bonus is the sudden and entertaining question that catches you unawares. ‘What time does Wales open for the day?’, ‘If I call my Aunt Bertha in Adelaide will she be home now?’, or ‘Can you show me how to go to the toilet?’ are all questions guaranteed to brighten your day.

Visitors from the United States of America are a particularly rich source of entertaining enquiries. In fact when they first see someone like me, dressed in tricorne hat, greatcoat, breeches and buckled shoes, they often seem unsure whether I am a re-enactor, or someone who has lived for a particularly long time. It is, of course, well known that our colonial cousins are fascinated by our history, but sometimes their understanding lags behind their enthusiasm.

FOR CRYING OUT LOUD!

This comes out in their questions. For example, an American visitor asked, ‘Say, you look like the kinda guy who would know pretty much everything around here – can you tell my wife and I where we can get a video of the Great Fire of London?’ Now as a town crier I am paid to be polite to the tourists so I must answer helpfully, but deep down I would love to reply, ‘Oh, you must mean the one directed by Samuel Pepys.’

Complete Circuit

One of our claims to fame in Chester is having the most continuous city walls in the country. So one day, as I was on those walls, I was approached by an American tourist couple. Our conversation went like this:

Tourist Lady: I understand that you can walk all the way around the city on top of the walls here in Chester. Is that right?

Town Crier: That’s right, Madam.

Tourist Lady: So am I right in thinking that you can get on the walls at one point, go all the way around the City, and get off the walls again at the same point you got on at?

Town Crier: That’s right, Madam.

Tourist Lady: So tell me, how far would it be to do that complete circuit?

Town Crier: Exactly two miles, Madam.

Tourist Lady: (turning to her husband) You know, Elmer, we should do that while we’re here, so that we can tell the folks back home we’ve been all the way around the City of Chester on top of the walls.

Tourist Lady: (turning back to the town crier) Two miles you say? So tell me, which would be the shortest direction to go in?

Seeing the Light

One has to be prepared for the fact that not all questions will be polite. One American lady was clearly irritated when she asked,

‘Say, why do your street lights keep making that strange beeping sound?’

‘I don’t know what you mean, Madam. Can you show me?’

She indicated the lights at a pelican crossing.

‘So what’s going on here?’

‘Well, it’s basically the same as you have in the States, Madam. It’s red for stop and green for go.’

She was clearly not satisfied: ‘Yeah, yeah, I know *that*. I know that! But what I’m asking you, young man, is why do we get that strange *beeping* sound every time the lights change colour?’

‘Well Madam, that’s an auditory confirmation for blind people who wouldn’t otherwise see the change of colour.’

She was outraged: ‘My God! That is awful! That is really terrible! That’s the worst thing I’ve heard since I’ve been over here! In the States we don’t allow blind people to drive!’

Double Take

I want to tell you about another encounter I had with an American tourist, but first I need to introduce you to my best friend for over thirty years: John Spencer. He and I share a fondness for bookshops and we often spend Saturday mornings wandering from bookshop to bookshop, interspersed by visits to coffee shops.

We continued this tradition when I became Chester’s town crier, but with one difference: I would now be in my town crier outfit, ready to do the midday proclamation. However, as far as I was concerned, I first had a couple of hours to indulge in books and coffee and conversation. I wouldn’t actually take up my town crier duties until nearly midday.

Now although John and I are friends, we are often taken to be brothers because we apparently look alike (an observation more flattering for him than for me). On this particular occasion we went into a coffee shop with a large window facing onto one of the main streets. When we went up to

the counter to order our coffees, the waitress said to us, 'Excuse me for asking, but are you twins?'

This amused us greatly, and we were still laughing about it when a tourist walked past the cafe window, saw my outfit and stopped dead in her tracks. After a brief hesitation she walked into the cafe and up our table.

'Excuse me, sir,' she said to me, 'Would you mind stepping out onto the sidewalk so that I could take your picture?'

I replied, 'Well I'm just having a coffee break now, but if you'd care to come to the High Cross at noon for the midday proclamation you can get as many pictures as you want.'

She answered, 'Oh yeah, I know that. I read about you in the brochure. But you see we have to get back on our bus at half-past eleven to head for our next destination. So please, sir, would you mind stepping out onto the sidewalk?'

She was so polite and enthusiastic, and I didn't want to disappoint her. So I said that if she wouldn't mind waiting just a couple of minutes for us to finish our coffees, I'd be delighted to join her 'on the sidewalk'.

I know from experience that tourists usually prefer to be in the photograph with the crier so, just to amuse John, and with the recent twins question in mind, I said to her, 'Why don't you give the camera to my twin brother so that we can both be on the picture together?'

She enthusiastically agreed to this proposal and gave her camera to John. But then, to my surprise, John took up the story: 'Yes, *our mother*, from the very first moment she realised that she was going to have twins, resolved there and then that she would never dress us the same. Today it's his turn to wear the outfit, but if you had come to Chester yesterday, or tomorrow, it would have been my turn.'

Needless to say, I didn't have any trouble smiling for the photograph. But this bizarre conversation wasn't over. She then turned to me and said, 'Thank you. Now would you mind taking the camera and getting a picture of me with your twin brother?'

Neither of us had the presence of mind to ask where in the States she came from but, wherever it was, we like to imagine her showing the photographs to family and friends, explaining: 'Well it all depends which

ASK ME ANOTHER!

day you visit Chester. It could be him wearing the outfit, or it could be his twin brother.'



85. The author (right) with his 'twin brother', John.