

In the air

## History lesson

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We spent our holidays in England this year: four days in London for „The Proms“, but before that, ten days in Pevensey Bay, at a rare jewel of a hotel called „The Sandcastle“, being treated like kings – indeed Edward VIII is reputed to have brought Mrs Simpson there in secret – and filling our eyes with the sea.

Pevensey Bay is heavy with history, being the place where Duke William of Normandy landed with his army on 28 September 1066. He famously went on to fight the English at the battle of Hastings, wresting the crown he had been promised from the Saxon king Harold and entering English history books as William the Conqueror, leader of the last successful invasion of the British Isles.

I have a personal interest in this story, since William brought along a cousin called Roger de Montgomerie, one of whose descendants was to become, some 850 years later, the father of my mother.

Anyway, ambling along the beach, scrunching pebbles underfoot (and vaguely keeping an eye out for a chunk of something Norman), I tried to conjure up the colour and commotion of that fateful landfall – the mass of boats darkening the horizon, closing in, the shouting, splashing, the soldiers wading weightily ashore, the clanking of metal. But nothing happened: no vision of an invading army, just the grey-blue sky fusing with the grey-blue sea and the gentle plash and hiss of the surf, pierced from time to time by a sudden shriek of seagulls.

Failure of imagination? Or lack of language for imagination to work with: the shapes of things, their names, their specificity...?

A few miles away, the Mediaeval Festival at Herstmonceux Castle was to provide an object lesson in how really to bring history to life – by faithfully reconstituting its concrete reality.

For three days each year, visitors are invited to experience in the flesh life in England in the Middle Ages. Cohorts of craftsmen, musicians and historians, professionals and amateurs, from all over Europe work all the year round to try and communicate an authentic impression of what mediaeval English life was like: how it looked, sounded, tasted, felt and smelt.

You are plunged into the spirit of the thing right at the entrance, where a smiling dame in linen cap and long



Photo: Guy Wagner

And there is falconry, the emblematic ancient sport of nobles

A homespun garment greets you with a cheery „Good morrow, my lady, my lord. Prithee enter!“ You enter as bidden – and spread out before you, beneath the towering stone walls of the moated castle, is a bright village of stripey tents with conical roofs topped by proud pennants.

Leather-clad craftsmen and artisans in earth-coloured garments demonstrate ancient skills and crafts using methods unchanged for half a millennium. Children watch huge-eyed and open-mouthed. Billowing smoke and the ring of hammer on anvil announce the smithy and the armourer’s tent, where tools of war and peace are being beaten into shape.

A coat of chain mail is hung out on display, empty of its knight, almost supernaturally heavy to lift, like in a dream when you try to run and your legs seemed anchored to the earth.

The brightly dressed visitors mill among the tents, musing over pennants and pendants, handmade shoes and emblazoned shields, heavy black pots and kettles, broomsticks, boxes, bowls and beakers, bolts of hand-dyed fabric; turning over in their hands cold iron-ware and smooth carved wood. Tiny knights in shining armour run around wielding sword and shield; little damsels preen in long gowns and tall head-dresses.

From the Tavern wafts the rich roast smell of suckling pig and earthy ember-baked potatoes. The herbalists’ tents emit the bitter perfumes of potions for love or hate, pungent herbs and dry peppery spices against rheum and malady. Here the curious gaze at Tarot cards or old runes, enquire their fate of necromancers.

And the very air dances to the tune of hurdy-gurdy, recorder and lute.

Before the castle, soldiers demonstrate the ancient arts of war with catapult and siege-works. Beyond the moat, archers in cap and jerkin stretch wide and release the arrows that speed un-

stoppable to their target. Small Robin Hoods struggle with longbows and learn that it is not as easy as it looks.

Slightly apart is the tiltyard where galloping knights with lance and sword show their skill at the games and the joust. And here, too, is falconry, the emblematic ancient sport of nobles. The falconer sends his Harris hawk and gyrfalcon up into the high air; the suspense as they are lost to sight; the sudden thrill of their vertiginous dive downwards to the lure.

And finally, the giant figures of Herne the horn-swaddled, from English folklore, and Andred, a Celtic lunar goddess, remembered in Anderida, the Anglo-Roman name for Pevensey, lead a stately swaying procession of soldiers playing on fife and drum, crusaders, peasants, dancers and minstrels snake-like round the village of tents, with a dancing bear bringing up the rear.

I photograph the bear; he widestretches his shaggy brown arms and embraces me. I feel blessed.

As we leave, the dames at the exit bid us „God speed“ and „Fare thee well“.

Outside, people share smiles of complicity on the walk back to the car park and the 21st century. I feel pride, tinged oddly with melancholy, at all the talent, enthusiasm and sheer energy involved in making such an event possible – and at the eager response of the thousands of spectators who come together to take part in it.

The Herstmonceux festival may be – has to be – a commercially viable enterprise; but it is also, and above all, an attempt to fire enthusiasm, to pass on skills and visceral knowledge, by people who care about this chunk of history and are determined that its concrete reality shall survive in the world of today... and into that of tomorrow.

In our age, where so much reality is virtual and experienced alone in front of computer screen or game console, one can only repeat „God speed“ and „Fare thee well“.