

The writing of  
*The Time Traveller's Guide*  
*to Medieval England*

Where did the idea come from? I have lived with it for such a long time it is difficult to say exactly. I have always been interested in the day-to-day life of people in the past, ever since school days. A lingering memory from the age of about nine or ten is that of visiting Grosmont Castle in Wales, where the great Henry, duke of Lancaster was born in the early fourteenth century. It was a summer's day; I looked up at the ruined the walls – open to the sky, like an immense broken tooth – and tried to see what the hall on the first floor looked like in its heyday, with Lady Lancaster seated there, and her attendants, servants and gentlemen of the household coming and going. I pictured the colours on the plaster, the linen and the salt on the table. And I imagined people moving through that same space above me, where bees were now flying in the afternoon sun, and through which I could see and hear the rustling of the trees. This strange juxtaposition of the poetic absence of the past, its overgrown ruins, and its continued real presence in a place through our collective memory, fascinated me – and it continues to do so. If more historians could tap into the poetic energy with which life's rich medieval tapestry was originally woven, more history books would be read by more people, and more of them would be highly valued.

In the summer of 1994 I was working in the history department at Reading University, transcribing and editing a series of seventeenth-century probate accounts for publication by the Berkshire Record Society. These wonderful documents were each created by an executor or an administrator after a person's death. In some cases, they give details of all the family expenditure in the weeks preceding the death and the months or years afterwards. They contain prices and values for almost every conceivable aspect of life – from oranges obtained at a cost of 3d for the funeral of Thomas Dier in 1599 to the 2s 6d spent on methridatum and dragon water on behalf of a plague victim in 1612. So detailed are these accounts, and so varied their contents, that it seemed to me in reading them that I could begin to recreate what these otherwise ordinary people did with their lives – the trials they had to face in farming their lands and tending their sick, how they dealt with ill children, and orphans. I was coming very close to seeing how I could meld scholarly research with my childhood dream of seeing the past come alive, without losing that poetic power of it being a strange, otherworldly place, forever gone.

My first idea was that of a 'hitch-hiker's guide to history'. I proposed to create a guide to the most extraordinary and unexpected corners of the past you might encounter if you were a real time traveller. If you happen to be a cook in Henry VIII's England, bear in mind you can be legally boiled to death for mass-poisoning. When did houses start to have glazed windows? Who made homosexuality illegal? It was a form of historical-life miscellany. One of the kinder editors who turned it down was John Hale of Robert Hale Ltd. In his letter of 7 November 1994 he wrote 'Possibly it would be better if you focussed on one period of history only viz the Elizabethan Era'. That seemed good advice; I decided to write about the fourteenth century.

Over the next few days, the idea for *The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England* came to me, in the last months of 1994.

I mentioned the idea to some friends. 'You should talk to Sophie', they said. 'She works in the marketing department at Waterstones' headquarters'. We were introduced on 5 January 1995 in the Lamb & Flag, Covent Garden. 'Yes, it is just Waterstones' sort of thing', she assured me, as she picked up and tried on my hat. It suited her. Two years later we got married. There was no doubt in my mind that it would be a shame not to write the book that had already changed my life.

It was not an easy process. By this time I was working for the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, and I was also still writing and publishing poems, so writing my *Time Traveller's Guide* was strictly an occasional business. Everything depended on getting that elusive contract. The first editor who seriously considered it decided it would have to be illustrated but made clear that she would not pay any image reproduction fees. 'We will do what we always do – scan some old, out-of-copyright black-and-white prints,' she declared. 'You mean woodcuts,' I answered. 'Unfortunately, they were not invented for another two hundred years.' 'Does it matter?' she replied. Bang went that contract. Another editor wanted me to concentrate on four major European cities – London, Paris, Venice and Florence – so the book could be lavishly illustrated and translated into umpteen languages and sold all over the world. 'And you are going to illustrate these places with what? Photographs of the places as they are today – changed and, in some cases, ruined - or as they were in the time I am describing? If it is a guide to a medieval place, the illustrations cannot represent a modern one. They cannot be of somewhere old, with road signs and telephone poles in the background. That would be like illustrating a book about Greece with images of Mexico.'

Eventually the eminently sensible Dr Tony Morris of Hambledon & London gave me a contract for the book in October 1999. It looked as if it would at last appear – but then fatherhood, a move to Exeter University and a PhD slowed things up. And at the end of 2000, while wondering how I could keep the family afloat while studying, and while my wife was expecting our second child, I thought of writing a historical biography. I was given a contract to write *The Greatest Traitor*. That was good news; but it meant that my contract with Hambledon & London had to be torn up.

By the time my third book, *The Fears of Henry IV* was underway, in April 2006, the fourth and fifth historical biographies in my sequence were planned and due to be contracted. But still I had not signed a contract for my *Time Traveller's Guide*. So I asked my agent to talk to my publisher. Following the thumbs-up signal from him the book was included in the contract drawn up in May 2006.

And that is where things really started to happen. For it was only in the actual writing that I came to realise how challenging and exciting the ideas implicit in this book really are. First and foremost is the very concept of what history is. We are all familiar with the talking heads of academics on TV. We are all familiar with textbooks written by scholars. But how do they arrive at their understanding of what happened in the past? Through evidence. In academic studies,

history is not synonymous with the past. It is not even synonymous with the study of the past. It is the study of evidence. The very idea of history is dependent on the existence of some evidence. If there is no evidence, there is no history. However, as *The Time Traveller's Guide* showed, there are other ways of conceiving history. A guidebook to a foreign country is not structured around the people who live there but around what the visitor needs to know. History too can be structured around the reader's curiosity about the past - what he or she wants to know - rather than a survey of the evidence. It is so simple: history can be defined by the boy looking up at the space where the hall of Grosmont Castle was in the early fourteenth century. Or by the archivist noting payments for dragon water and oranges and trying to envisage what daily life was like in the years around 1600.

So, in my *Time Traveller's Guide* I had chosen to write a book in which my theme was defined by my readers' interests and questions. That was going to require some second-guessing. The guidebook format facilitated this to a certain extent. However, how do you start to describe 'what to wear' when almost no fourteenth-century clothing survives? I had problems with that chapter. I did not find the section on medieval justice any easier. Administrative districts are always complicated, and when you have civil law, ecclesiastical law, manorial customs, and borough ordinances to consider, and a plethora of courts and commissions, it is very difficult to produce a readable text. Indeed, so complicated are some books about medieval law that I was on the verge of recommending readers not visit medieval England at all.

The compensations of the book more than made up for the difficulties. The freedom to talk about aspects of fourteenth-century life without having to direct my efforts to engaging with any academic debate was wonderful - liberating. Sections on the violence and youth of the population, on male clothing, on the plague and on English poetry were especially satisfying. In the introduction I managed to say something I have wanted to say in print for a long time: 'The key to learning something about the past might be a ruin or an archive but the means whereby we may understand it is - and always will be - us ourselves.'

Late one night, when about halfway through the book, I drove into Exeter to see the film *Atonement*. My mind had been filled with ideas for the book on the journey in; but coming home I could think only of the film. I had been strongly affected by the realisation that some writers can take the 'dialogue' we have with the past, and develop it in an emotional way. Why don't historians do this more often? Sometimes we do - the death of Queen Philippa in *The Perfect King* for example - but on the whole, emotion and drama is excised from history books, especially academic ones. But many people are seriously interested in how their forebears lived, so why not write social history with an emotional kick? At that moment, driving down the winding road in to the village, I knew what I had to do. I had to write a poetic ending which had emotional impact as well as socio-historical meaning. The idea for the envoi came to me later that same night.

The first draft of the book was finished on 20 November 2007. It had taken roughly thirteen years, and another year would pass before it would be published. The third and final draft was completed on 15 March 2008. By then I had heard that the theoretical essay written alongside the book 'What isn't History? The Nature and Enjoyment of History in the Twenty-first

Century' would be published by the journal *History* in October, the same time as the book. The two should go some way to making people think about what history really is in the modern world, and how important it is for an understanding of humanity, and what life was like for our fourteenth-century forebears.

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