**GUTHLAC: a story to dance to**

**What the work is**

Guthlac is a piece of words and music, lasting nearly 43 minutes. It is the story of an Anglo-Saxon saint, which sounds a very unpromising beginning, but I hope that it will be an exciting sound experience, as well as giving some food for thought.

I must warn possible listeners at the outset that this is a very intense piece, even relentless. Its texture is constantly fluctuating, changing and disturbing. The world of demons which he encounters is felt to be constantly around him. This is because my most basic aim is to try to give some sense of the stress and distress which I believe that someone like Guthlac experiences. I make no claim to have serious psychiatric knowledge, but the accounts I have read of various types of mental issue suggest that such a state of tension is the constant Calvary which many sufferers undergo.

This means that, though a story is being told and can be followed throughout, the basic texture is not that of a narrator with music supporting and framing what is said. Instead all the voices are typically part of the turbulence, and are fighting to be heard, even in the case of the narrator. This is how I try to give a sense of a person on the edge, who frequently feels about to go under.

Thus listeners should not expect to sit back and have the music played to them. Instead I hope they will engage with and be drawn into the music. In making the effort to listen to the voices, they will be drawn into the texture, which will surround them. Hopefully the listener will them have some sense of what it is like to be in Guthlac’s position.

**What it is not – treatment of sources**

I decided from the outset that, despite the fact that I am a life-long atheist, the aim was neither to attack the religious dimension of the story, nor to present it as the original writers, firm believers, did. They had a clear didactic purpose – by presenting the life of a saint to give the reader uplift and inspiration to live a righteous life. There are frequent admonitions and comments in the original texts to this end. I have omitted such comments by the writers, preferring only to give that text which tells a story.

This is because my interest was in the experiences of Guthlac as a man. The interpretation of these is left to the listener. Thus the believer should find nothing that is theologically contentious; especially as Guthlac himself is presented as a person of immense fortitude, arising from total conviction of the existence and justice of God.

To avoid giving unnecessary labour and anxiety to some possible listeners, I must also make clear at once that this is not a work of scholarship, but an imaginative interpretation of the sources. Those who are concerned with such detail must go to the source texts, - which they probably already know anyway. I have in fact kept very close to my originals, but have made omissions and amendments to suit my purposes.

I must also at this point defend reader James Gordon from the possible attacks of specialists and purists. He has brought to bear his experience of having a mother who was a scholar and teacher of the earlier English language at Cambridge, as well as his own significant knowledge of Classical languages. Nevertheless, we agreed that life was too short for him to spend months researching and perfecting the version of Old English that the writer (let alone Guthlac himself) would have used.

Our overriding concern was to bring to life texts which many have visited only as a tedious chore for an examination.

The mode and vigour of delivery was our first concern. We knew that the original text may well have only been meant for refined readers. But we wished to convey in the Anglo‑Saxon element some of the feeling and effect which seems to have been brought about by the original renderings of works such as *Beowulf*. We wished also to give some impression of the violent and often barbaric world in which Guthlac lived

We were agreed that the reality of the work of the *scop* (pronounced shope -the Anglo-Saxon term for the poet/singer) was not some rarefied experience of noble thoughts presented and attended to with near religious reverence in a recital room. As performers ourselves, we could easily imagine the problem of getting and keeping the attention of illiterate soldiers, armed, with a lot of mead inside them – by contrast our experience of gigs at rowdy student events in the North-East was genteel. But we also knew that the person who can project in the right way can win over the same type of audience to great enthusiasm.

**Guthlac – the basic story**

Guthlac was born in 674. He was “of royal stock” , being a descendant at several removes of King Offa I. At about the age of 15 he began to follow a life of what was something between military conflict and brigandage. During these conflicts he came into contact with Britons, notably in wars with the Welsh. After nine years of this life, the fate of his ancestors, most commonly a violent end, began to trouble him, and according to the narrative, he had a vision which made him decide to follow a religious life.

He entered the monastery at Repton, Derbyshire, but found this very unsatisfactory, because many monks lived a far from holy life, and Guthlac’s attitudes were severe, especially towards alcohol.

He therefore left and went to live as a hermit on an island, Crowland, in the Great Fen, where he arrived on St Bartholomew’s Day (25 August) in 699AD.

Crowland still exists as a small town on a slight rise, near Peterborough. It is now in the middle of an agricultural plain. You can still see and visit the ruins of Crowland Abbey, built later as a result of the tradition which arose after Guthlac’s death.

But the area at that time was fenland, the nature and extent of which varied, dependent on changes in sea level. Crowland was then an island in the Great Fen which extended from The Wash nearly to Peterborough. (The very different modern landscape is the result of the drainage of the area carried out by the Dutch engineer Vermuyden in the 17th Century).

The knowledge of Guthlac’s holy life spread, especially as he is said to have performed miraculous cures. So he had visitors, especially Aethelbald, who became king of Mercia in 716. Though this was important to the development of the saint’s cult, I have preferred to focus on his life of isolation.

Guthlac died on April 11, 714 AD. His place was taken by Cissa, a converted pagan, who was also later canonised. He may well have met and provided Felix, the biographer of Guthlac, with source material.

Guthlac had a sister, Pega, who according to some accounts followed him to the island. But demons took her form in order to tempt the hermit, so he asked her to leave. She returned after his death to bury him, and a year later moved his miraculously preserved body to a special shrine. It is claimed that she made a donation to the Abbey at Crowland of Guthlac's Psalter and a scourge given to him by Saint Bartholomew.

Her piety resulted in a pilgrimage to Rome, where it is said all the church bells rang out in her honour. After she died her relics, the source of later miracles, were placed in a church dedicated to her. This no longer exists and its site is not known.

**Original accounts of the saint’s life**

At the request of King Aelfwald of the East Angles, a monk, Felix, probably a local man, wrote a biography of the saint in Latin between 730-740 AD. This was the *Vita Sancti Guthlaci auctore Felice.*

By the eleventh century there was an Anglo-Saxon translation. The story then inspired two poems in Anglo-Saxon, composed in the late eighth century. Known as *Guthlac A* and *Guthlac B,* they are to be found in the Exeter Book, a manuscript in the possession of the Cathedral.

In the 13th century a roll was created which contains 18 roundels (circular pictures) telling the life of the saint. This is now in the British Library.

Bede wrote an account of the life of St Dryhthelm in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book 5, Chapter 12.  The saint was a merchant who apparently died, was given a view of Hell and returned to life, after he lived a monastic life. The account is very vivid and though we do not have sufficient evidence to prove it, my belief is that some descriptions of Drythelm’s experiences could also reasonably describe those of Guthlac.

**Approach**

I made a decision that the piece should present itself to the listener in three basic ways.

First there is the story, told by a narrator, who is “hearing“ the voice of the Anglo-Saxon *scop*.

Second, there is a constant underlying beat, inspired by Dance music, to get the listener respond rhythmically and be driven along by it. Dance music is in fact heavy, and insistent; these characteristics suited my purpose.

However, Dance music is not crude, whereas I have made the sounds heavier and less defined at many points – indeed, they would be seen as serious technical failures in a true Dance piece, which attends carefully to the definition of the lower parts (kick and bass)

But I wanted a sense of crudeness, violence, chaos and disintegration, to echo Guthlac’s mental state. In addition, those who know my work should be alerted to the fact that this piece does not feature the swing and lifting momentum which is very typical of my music.

The third element is the types of sound and timbre which are deployed. There are few themes, and they are used as the organising element of the piece, in the way which is typical of most composers, including myself. Taking inspiration from both Dance and other forms of electronic music, I use electronic sources, acoustic bass at times, and natural sounds of water and fen ambience. The aim of these sounds is to engender an emotional response in the listener. which should at times be very oppressive and disturbing, again echoing the experiences of Guthlac.

There is in fact, a fourth element, sung music (performed by Frances and James). This seemed the best way to suggest the positive side of the experiences of Guthlac and Pega. James was able to draw upon his Catholic upbringing to give me the *Credo* and variousPsalms – Guthlac is described as singing Psalms to give himself strength in moments of tribulation.

I also took the fact that Guthlac’s favourite psalm was Psalm 67. I noticed the fact that it includes the Hebrew world *Selah*. It seems that it is rather imprecise in meaning, but is a point at which there is an outburst of song in praise of the Lord, rather on the lines of a *Gloria*. I wrote a piece, of which an extract is used to suggest the Heavenly Host who appears with St Bartholomew. This was a tricky decision, as I did not wish to end up with a Hollywood version of Heaven. But I decided that probably some similar inspiration is in fact what many people experience when they feel that they are in contact with the divine, a world from which everything mundane and painful is removed, but which relates to our normal experience., rather than being something of a very different nature.

I also created a version of the introit *Dilexisti justitiam.* I chose this because I had found an image of a manuscript of the piece in the British Library which is from the *Crowland Gradual* and is dedicated to St Pega.

**The text**

The script has three elements:

(1) The main story, taken from the source material (see below). Ideally I would have had a text which broadly echoed the Anglo-Saxon pattern of two half lines of two accents, linked by alliteration.

There was no one to do this, so I was driven back on my own limited capacities in this field. Thus there is a tendency towards rather than a strict adherence to the Anglo-Saxon structure.

(2) For the Anglo-Saxon text I took extracts which suited my purpose. These come not only from the *Exeter Book* but also in some cases from *Beowulf*. One relevance of the latter is that scholars have shown that the saint is presented in terms of an Anglo-Saxon warrior, but one who gains his victory not with physical weapons but with spiritual ones - faith and the words of scripture.

(3) I have drawn on the Latin text of Felix, but decided not to include anything from it – two languages are enough for one piece! More seriously, the Latin text is mostly very turgid. However, one of the things which convinced me to go on with the project was that when describing Hell, Felix writes with power and conviction. It was a very real and fearful place to our ancestors.

(4) I drew on Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* for another account of Hell, in this case the description given by St Drythelm. I felt that the description was again very vivid and so harmonised very well with those in the Guthlac sources. Also, though the Guthlac texts do not describe him immersing himself in the fen waters for long periods, I felt that the cast of his mind and that of Drythelm (from which the extracts are taken) made it a very plausible way in which he would have mortified the flesh.

(5) After I had described my project to him, my old friend and long time collaborator, Edwin Webb, was motivated to go away and write a story (*Fen Fugue*), which includes a poem. This fitted my needs perfectly. Edwin caught the moods of the fen which I wished to create. His story also takes up the Fen legends of will-of-the-wisp and other phenomena, and gave me the text for the gloomy fenman who warns Guthlac against going into the fen.

**The music**

Though inspired by Dance music, what I have created is in important respects outside the limits which are the Dance norm. I have mentioned the realisation of the beat, but should also say that the texture is much thicker or richer than what is typical of Dance music. In the latter, economy of resource (one of the greatest gifts of a composer) permits the creator to emphasise the essential elements and to project them at high volume with great attack and power. By contrast my texture is at times very cluttered according to such standards. But I feel (or at least hope) that this generates an underlying feeling of unease which is a reflection of Guthlac’s essential state of mind.

The use and treatment of the voice is also very different from that found in Dance music. This is because it is first and foremost a story, and thus led by the voices. As I have said above, the sung sections are more typically traditional, in an attempt to create the sense of peace which the characters were looking for. Perhaps EM Forster’s phrase “the restfulness of classic art” is relevant here.

**Performers**

**Felix Cross** was for many years the Director of Black Theatre Company ( known later as Nitro), and was awarded the MBE for his services to black (and minority) arts. He is currently living in Australia, and is very occupied with the increasingly thriving arts there, notably among the Aboriginal community. I am glad to say that he accepted the offer to read the words of Guthlac the character.

**James Gordon** was originally a fellow member of CMU and we have collaborated many times since. He had great reservations at first about being involved in the project, as he did not wish in any way to be thought to be giving approval to various aspects of Catholic belief. But I convinced him to use his knowledge and performance talents to read the Anglo-Saxon sections, which he did with great imagination. He also provided both invaluable guidance and sung examples of the Psalms and *Credo.*

**Frances Lee** is my wife, and has borne some two years of my thinking aloud about the project. But she has for many years been a reader and choir singer and has more recently become an active poet. She took on the challenge of the narration, the presentation of the Edwin Webb poem, and the singing of *Dilexisti* and Psalm 67.

**Why I wrote it**

This has no simple answer. That I should have spent so much effort on the project is very surprising to those who know me as a life-long atheist, with no belief or interest in matters religious or spiritual.

Originally I came across Guthlac as part of historical research into the Fens, as part of a proposed project on the area with artist the late Moira Jarvis. The aim was to do something in Ely Cathedral, but it lapsed, when it became clear how great the worldly expense of a spiritual project would be.

Other projects came along and were completed, and Moira and I then decided that we would return to some sort of Fen project (to be joined by my wife, Frances, who would provide readings and also original poems).

The primeval Fen world

The first appeal of the subject was that Guthlac was an Anglo-Saxon, a topic which had been an important part of my English degree. This suggested a fascinating, mysterious and dark world in the period before the Fens were drained by Vermuyden in the 17th Century (the only significant area of the older type left is Wicken Fen, just outside Ely). There was long history – the Romans (who for example constructed a long “lode “ (water channel) near Wicken and startling and exciting remains from centuries before them can be seen at Flag Fen near Peterborough.

There was also the mythic element, most widely known through the poem *Beowulf*. Water which is not clear exerts a fascination, mixed with a little foreboding, for many of us. It suggests mystery, even evil.

I have attempted to give these responses some sort of expression in the “Fen sections”. I see them as a sort of backcloth, a more permanent and fundamental part of existence than the human events of the main story. To my mind these sections are given much greater impact through the words of Edwin Webb.

A different personality

The next attraction for me was the experiences of Guthlac, his retreat to an isolated island and his torments by demons. I have always found literature very appealing which gives me an insight into people whose character and experience is very different from my own. I think another interest was that his situation in some ways parallels that of Robinson Crusoe – a story which has always fascinated me - though his responses were very different.

The accounts of demons and Hell

But my interest was really grabbed when I came to read the accounts in Anglo-Saxon and Latin of the torments, the demons and above all the visit to Hell. These descriptions at once suggested a musical response using the resources of Dance and other electronic music which have become a major interest for me in recent years. It seemed that the medium was ideal, in creating a heavy and insistent power, through its beat, and wild and disturbing emotions through its ability to create intense and sculpted sounds not available to standard instruments.

I should perhaps say that I do not take the accounts literally – for me there are no demons. But as far as I can see, there are those who suffer from various types of mental illness, which are as terrifying to them as any physical reality. The article by Mary Wellesley (see below) explained how the experiences could have been brought about by a diet of muddy or stagnant water and mouldy barley bread, which generates ergot containing LSD. Research shows that extreme conditions, especially cold, can also contribute to such experiences.

A metaphor of isolation

It is generally agreed that *Robinson Crusoe* is to be read both literally and as a metaphor – in his cases of human resourcefulness, especially as manifested in the Protestant ethic.

I came to feel that *Guthlac* could also be seen as a metaphor. We have a man who, despite his apparent conformity to his society and indeed his success within it, has deep uncertainties. Turning for inspiration where it might most be expected (in his case the monastery), A man who looks for inspirations where it might be expected (those living a holy life) but is disillusioned - perhaps a man who was not pleasable except by a different sort of existence, since humans would inevitably be fallible.

So he retreats into physical isolation, because he is psychologically isolated – he lives apart from others – he finds Pega a distraction. But he can then create the ideal life and experience he seeks, singing psalms, feeding the fen creatures, meditating on the perfection of Heaven.

Though a work of art never expresses the whole personality of the artist, I felt I could identify with some of these mental states.

**Sources**

I am totally indebted to and hence very grateful to the following sources and contacts. Note that for current purposes “Anglo-Saxon” and “Old English” are taken as interchangeable.

Guthlac’s life

Colgrave, Bertram (1985), *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac*. Cambridge University Press

The Exeter Book texts are available on: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/ascp/a03_02.htm>

A rational interpretation of Guthlac’s vision is given in:

Wellesley, Mary (2016) at: http://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2016/04/the-tripping-saint.html

The presentation of Guthlac of the Anglo‑Saxon warrior is discussed in:

Hall, Alaric, ‘Constructing Anglo-Saxon Sanctity: Tradition, Innovation and Saint Guthlac’, in

Higgs Strickland, Debra (ed) (2007), *Images of Sanctity: Essays in Honour of Gary Dickson*, Leiden. Brill

The saints’ feast days are Guthlac April 11, Pega January 8.

The Anglo-Saxon background

Klaeber, Fredrick, (1950)  *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburgh.* D C Heath

Bradley, S J M, (1995) *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. Everyman series, Dent.

Immensely valuable attempts to re-create the Anglo-Saxon experience of lyre and song have been made by the following enthusiasts (there are others as a web search will easily reveal):

Brian Kay: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yzF5SY7WJg>

The poem Deor: Thomas and Will Rowan: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3ZvjTHpb1A>

A re-creation of Old English pronunciation is to be found on:

<https://ealdaenglisc.wordpress.com/old-english-lessons/lesson-0-alphabet-and-pronunciation/>

The following site offers Benjamin Bagby offers the opening lines of Beowulf in a way which is very dramatic, and which James and I believe must be much more like what the Anglo-Saxon audience expected and heard: <http://tindeck.com/dl/vqsh>

For those who would like to look at the original text the following Old English dictionary is invaluable:

<http://old-engli.sh/dictionary.php>

The Fens and their history

Original Bronze Age droveway and log boats, as well as modern recreations of dwellings can be seen at

Flag Fen, The Droveway, Northey Road, Peterborough, Cambridgeshire PE6 7QJ tel: 01733 864 468

Email: [flag.fen@vivacity-peterborough.com](mailto:flag.fen@vivacity-peterborough.com)

An article about the boats is to be found at:

https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/jun/04/eight-prehistoric-boats-bronze-age

The address of Wicken Fen is

Lode Lane Wicken Cambs CB7 5XP Ph 01353 720274 email [wickenfen@nationaltrust.org](mailto:wickenfen@nationaltrust.org)

website [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wickenfen](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wickenfen)

Sounds

I am grateful to the following sources of free samples:

[www.soundbible.co](http://www.soundbible.co)

freesound.org

fressfx.co.uk

My special and deep felt thanks go to the magazine Computer *Music*, without whose samples and software I doubt that this project could ever have been made.

Musical information

Information on the jaw harp: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mrxxed54hcg>

Sung texts

Introit: *Dilexisti justitiam*

Dilexisti justitiam et odisti iniquitatem, propterea unxit te Deus, Deus tuus, oleo laetitiae prae consortibus tuis

*(Thou hast chosen justice and hated wickedness, so God, your God, hath anointed you with the oil of joy, above thy fellows)*

The image of the manuscript is to be seen at:   
[www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/illmanus/egermanucoll/d/011ege000003759u00065000.html](http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/illmanus/egermanucoll/d/011ege000003759u00065000.html)

A version sung by French monks which we used for guidance can be heard at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cf0FWMnqU7k>

Psalm 67

Full text – I have used only verses 1-3

**67**God be merciful unto us, and bless us; and cause his face to shine upon us; Selah.

**2**That thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations.

**3**Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee.

**4**O let the nations be glad and sing for joy: for thou shalt judge the people righteously, and govern the nations upon earth. Selah.

**5**Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee.

**6**Then shall the earth yield her increase; and God, even our own God, shall bless us.

**7**God shall bless us; and all the ends of the earth shall fear him.

(King James Version)

Finally I offer my thanks to the following people who have actively supported and helped me with the project:

Felix Cross, James Gordon and Frances Lee for their performances and comments

Edwin Webb for his short story and poem *Fenland Fugue* and much veryvaluable discussion and advice.

Susanne Griffin Drake for continuing sensitivity towards the project, and deep knowledge of matters of the spirit

Kevin Drake who has from the start always urged me to develop my electronic musical work

Mr David Searle, Churchwarden of Crowland Abbey Church, who gave a warm welcome to us and freely gave of his great knowledge of the saint. If you wish to visit the church, contact him on: 07761 549 865

Rev Mike Ongyerth, of the same parish, whose lively response (together with that of David Searle) to the work convinced me that all the effort of making the work had been worthwhile.