

Jarrow
Hall

© Jay Johnstone

Here be Dragons

Anglo-Saxon Influence on Fantasy

July to November 2026

Jarrow Hall, Church Bank, NE32 3DY

Free to annual pass holders

Call to Adventure

Fantasy stories have captured the imagination of people for generations. Perhaps you yourself like to lose yourself in tales of heroes and magic.

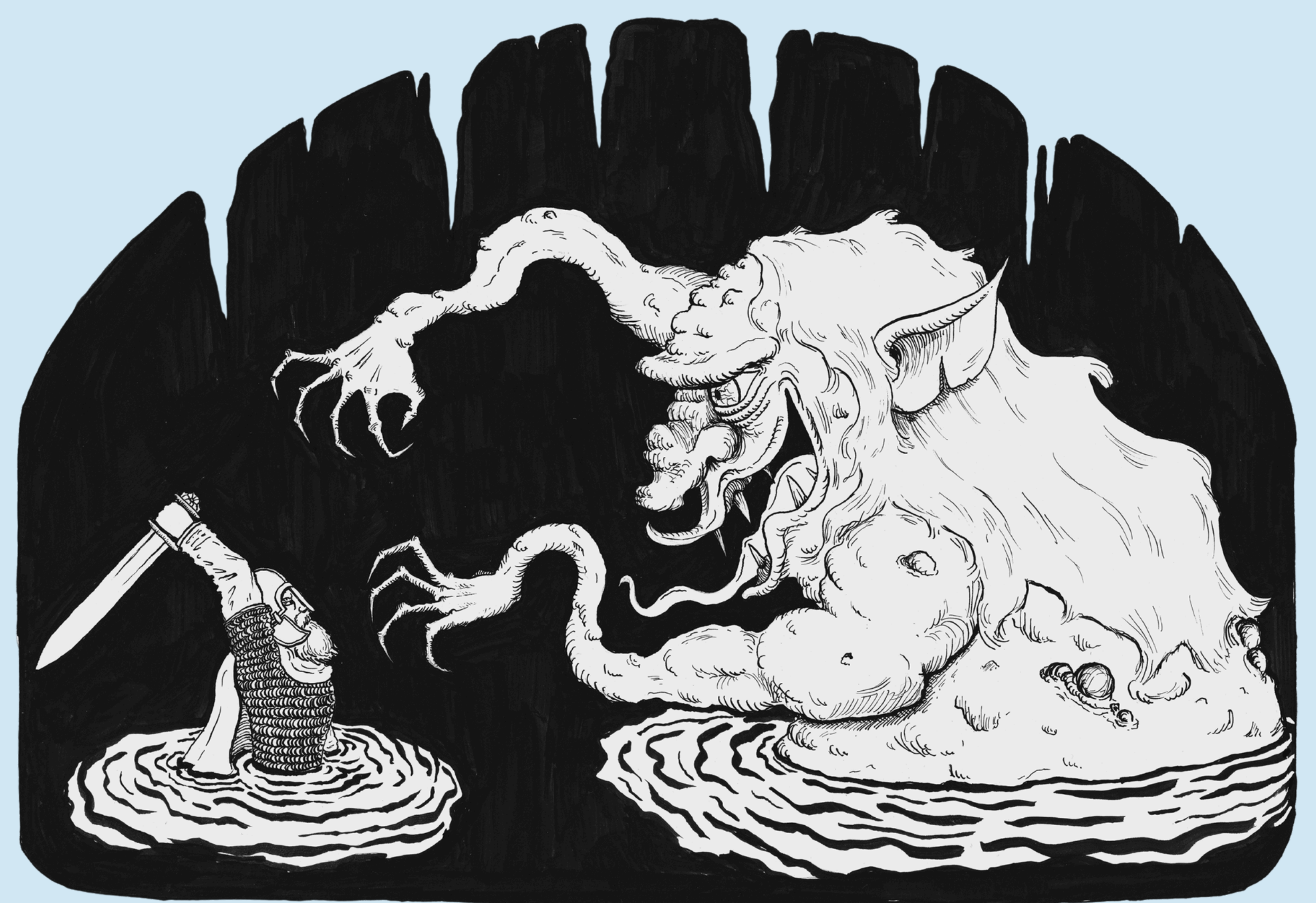
But the stories we enjoy today have a much longer history than you might realise.

In our favourite fantasy stories we explore themes of fate, bravery, glory and fame, as well as good vs evil. They all have origins in the stories of the past. Long before Bilbo Baggins set foot outside of the Shire, other heroes faced dragons and monsters and battled with magic swords.

These staples of Western fantasy are also important in Anglo-Saxon tales.

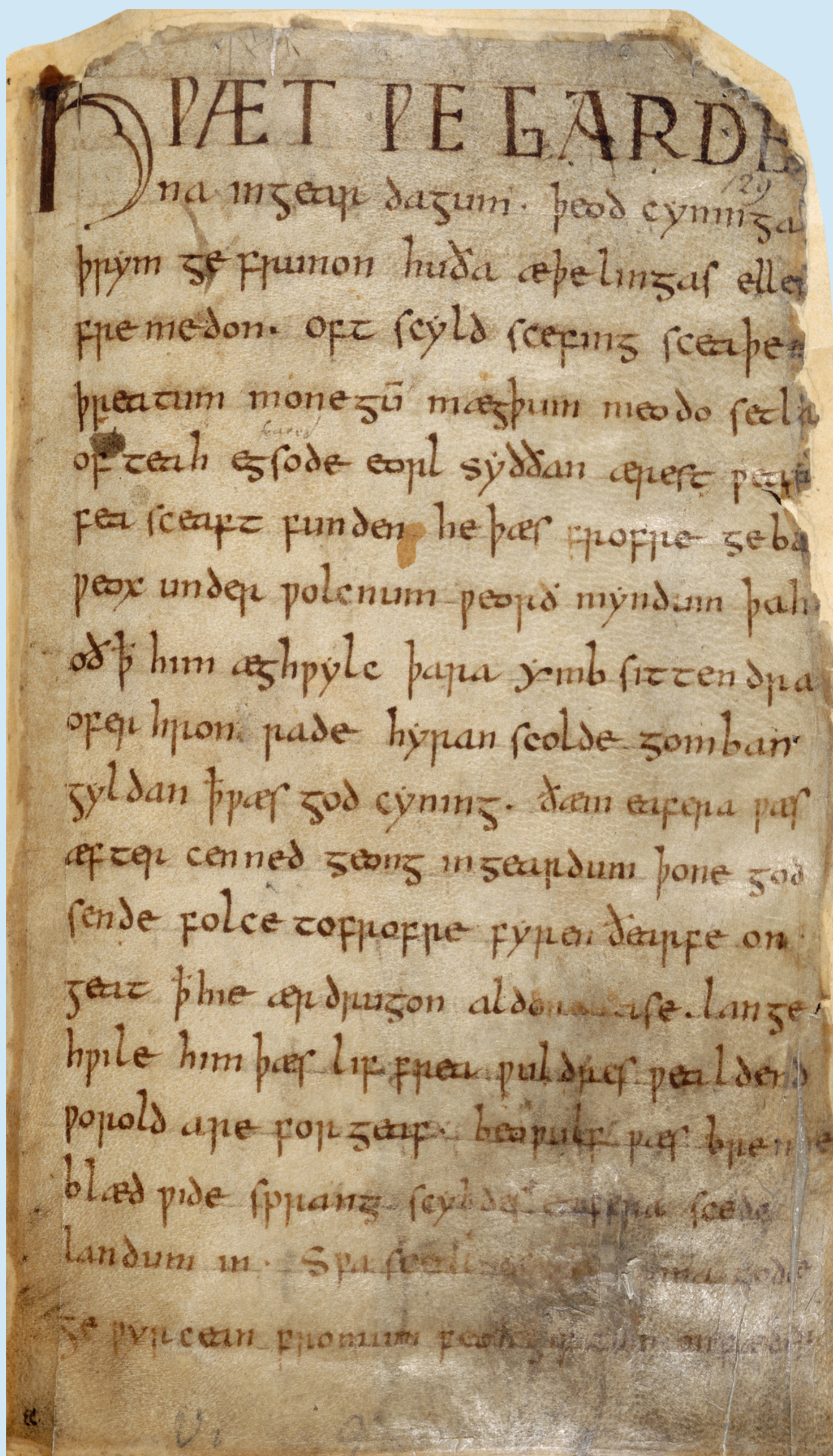


Book of Hours, Initial with dragon, Walters Manuscript W.39, Folio 69r (detail)



Beowulf fighting Grendel's mother
© Bertie Armstrong

Heroes of Old



The beginning of *Beowulf*. Cotton Vitellius A. XV, f.132, British Library.

A famous Anglo-Saxon story is *Beowulf*, an epic poem that was written down around the 10th century CE. It tells the story of a hero named Beowulf who battled monsters and fought a dragon.

Beowulf tells us a lot about what the Anglo-Saxons believed and the stories they wanted to tell. It is a story of good and evil, reputation and legacy. These are all themes you can see in fantasy stories today.

The poem explores what it means to be a hero - a good hero was loyal and brave. It shows what the Anglo-Saxons believed made a good ruler. A good ruler needed to be generous and had a responsibility to their followers.

We see this in other Old English stories too. The Old English poem *The Travellers' Song* mentions famed kings like Atilla the Hun and Offa of Mercia. It discusses their bravery, victory in battle and their riches. In this time, just like in fantasy worlds, a king could win fame through generosity.



What Makes A Hero?

Quotes from Beowulf

**Dutiful and
honourable**

*"A warrior will sooner die
than live a life of shame."*

**Generous
and fair**

*"They said that of all the kings upon
the earth he was the man most
gracious and fair-minded, kindest to
his people and keenest to win fame"*

**Brave and
strong**

*"I've never known fear; as a youth
I fought in endless battles. I am
old now, but I will fight again, seek
fame still, if the dragon hiding in
his tower dares to face me"*



*“Wandering like this, driven by chance,
minstrels travel through many lands;
they state their needs, say words of thanks,
always, south or north, they find some man
well-versed in songs, generous in gifts,
who wishes to raise his renown with his men,
to do great things, until everything passes,
light and life together; he who wins fame
has lasting glory under the heavens”*

The Widsith, also known as The Travellers' Song
C.10th century



Beowulf Survives

Some of the most popular fantasy stories today are *The Lord of the Rings* series and *The Hobbit*. In fact, the author of the books, J.R.R Tolkien, is often called ‘the father of fantasy’. This is because of the success of the books and their influence on the fantasy genre and the stories that came after.

Did you know Tolkien was a professor at Oxford University and studied the Anglo-Saxons and Old English? He even wrote his own translation of *Beowulf*. This background inspired his writing.

The Anglo-Saxons loved to tell stories through poems like *Beowulf*. Tolkien’s use of poems in his books is inspired by Anglo-Saxon poems and storytelling. And as you will see, that is not the only way the world of Middle Earth takes inspiration from the Anglo-Saxons and their literature.

“Beowulf survives: for a time, for as long as learning keeps any honor in its land.”

(Tolkien on the life and relevance of Beowulf)



"Lord of the rings 12" by Themeplus is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0. - Still from the *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* film showing the One Ring



One of the poems in the *The Lord of the Rings* series, *The Lament of the Rohirrim*, is very similar to the Old English poem *The Wanderer*

*Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing
Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing?
Where is the hand on the harpstring, and the red fire glowing?
Where is the spring and the harvest and the tall corn growing?
They have passed like rain on the mountain, like a wind in the meadow;
The days have gone down in the West, behind the hills into shadow.
Who will gather the smoke of the dead wood burning,
Or behold the flowing years from the Sea returning?*

The Lament of the Rohirrim, from The Two Towers

*Where is the horse? Where the young warrior? Where now the gift-giver?
Where are the feast-seats? Where all the hall joys?
Alas for the bright cup! Alas byrned warrior!
Alas the lord's glory! How this time hastens,
grows dark under night-helm, as it were not!*

Excerpt of *The Wanderer*, an Old English poem about an exiled man lamenting the loss of his lord, his fellow warriors and his old way of life. It explores themes of grief and loss.



The Language of Rohan

Tolkien studied Old English and used the language and Old English literature as an inspiration for his work.

The language and warrior culture of the Rohirrim are inspired by the Anglo-Saxons. The main difference is the Rohirrim ride horses into battle, which the Anglo-Saxons avoided. The king of Rohan is called Théoden. This is taken from the Old English word *þeoden*, meaning “king” or “prince”.

“The language of Rohan I have accordingly made to resemble Old English”

J.R.R Tolkien in Appendix F, *Return of the King*

Edoras is the capitol of Rohan. In Old English, the word *edoras* means dwellings, houses or enclosures. The name of Meduseld, the great golden hall in Edoras, is taken from the Old English word for a mead hall or feasting hall.



The Sutton Hoo helmet. By IH (40) (Flickr), CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons



Rohirric Helmet from the *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

The Desolation of Smaug



Psalter, Saint Michael Slaying a Dragon,
Walters Manuscript W.78, fol. 54r

There are lots of things from *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* that take inspiration from *Beowulf*.

For example, the story of the dragon, Smaug in *The Hobbit* is very similar to the story of the dragon in *Beowulf*. In *Beowulf*, the fire-breathing dragon is angry when a silver cup is stolen from his hoard and he attacks neighbouring towns. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo steals a golden cup from Smaug who, like the *Beowulf* dragon, is greedy and hoards riches. The furious Smaug attacks nearby Laketown.

In the *Lord of the Rings* series, after Boromir dies he is laid in a boat which is sent down the river Anduin. This is similar to popular ideas of Viking burials, where the dead are buried in a boat which is then set on fire on the water. There is no archaeological evidence the Vikings really did this, but some Anglo-Saxon and Viking people were really buried in boats on land. One really famous Anglo-Saxon boat burial is Sutton Hoo.

Boromir's burial is also very similar to the burial of Scyld Scefing in *Beowulf*, and maybe Tolkien was inspired by this.



The great mead hall of Meduseld in Rohan is thought to have been inspired by the hall Heorot in *Beowulf*. In fact, when describing Meduseld, Tolkien almost directly translates line 311 of *Beowulf*, describing Heorot.

*“guman onetton sigon
ætsomne oððæt hy sæl timbred
geatolic ond goldfah ongyton mihton
ðæt wæs foremærost foldbuendum
receda under roderum on ðæm se rica bad
lixte se leoma ofer landa fela”*

Beowulf lines 306-311 in the
original Old English

*“They marched in step, hurrying on
till the timbered hall rose before
them, radiant with gold. Nobody
on earth knew of another building
like it. Majesty lodged there, its
light shone over many lands.”*

Beowulf lines 306-311 translated
by Seamus Heaney (2000)

*“And it seems to my eyes that it is thatched
with gold. The light of it shines far over the
land. Golden, too, are the posts of its doors”*

From Legolas' description of Meduseld in *The
Two Towers*, Chapter VI "The Golden Hall"



Fate Goes Ever as Fate Must

There are lots of themes in Anglo-Saxon stories like *Beowulf* which you can also see in *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. One example is fate, which the Anglo-Saxons called *wyrd*.

"You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have."

Gandalf's answer when Frodo asks why he was chosen to bear the ring,
The Fellowship of the Ring

Fate

"Often, for undaunted courage, fate spares the man it has not already marked."

Beowulf, lines 572-573,
translated by Seamus Heaney

"Courage is found in unlikely places."
Fellowship of the Ring

Courage

"A warrior will sooner die than live a life of shame."

Beowulf, lines 2890-2891,
translated by Seamus Heaney

The theme of courage is seen in the *Lord of the Rings* series when Boromir tries to betray the Fellowship to take the Ring for himself. He redeems himself by sacrificing himself in an epic last stand to save his companions.

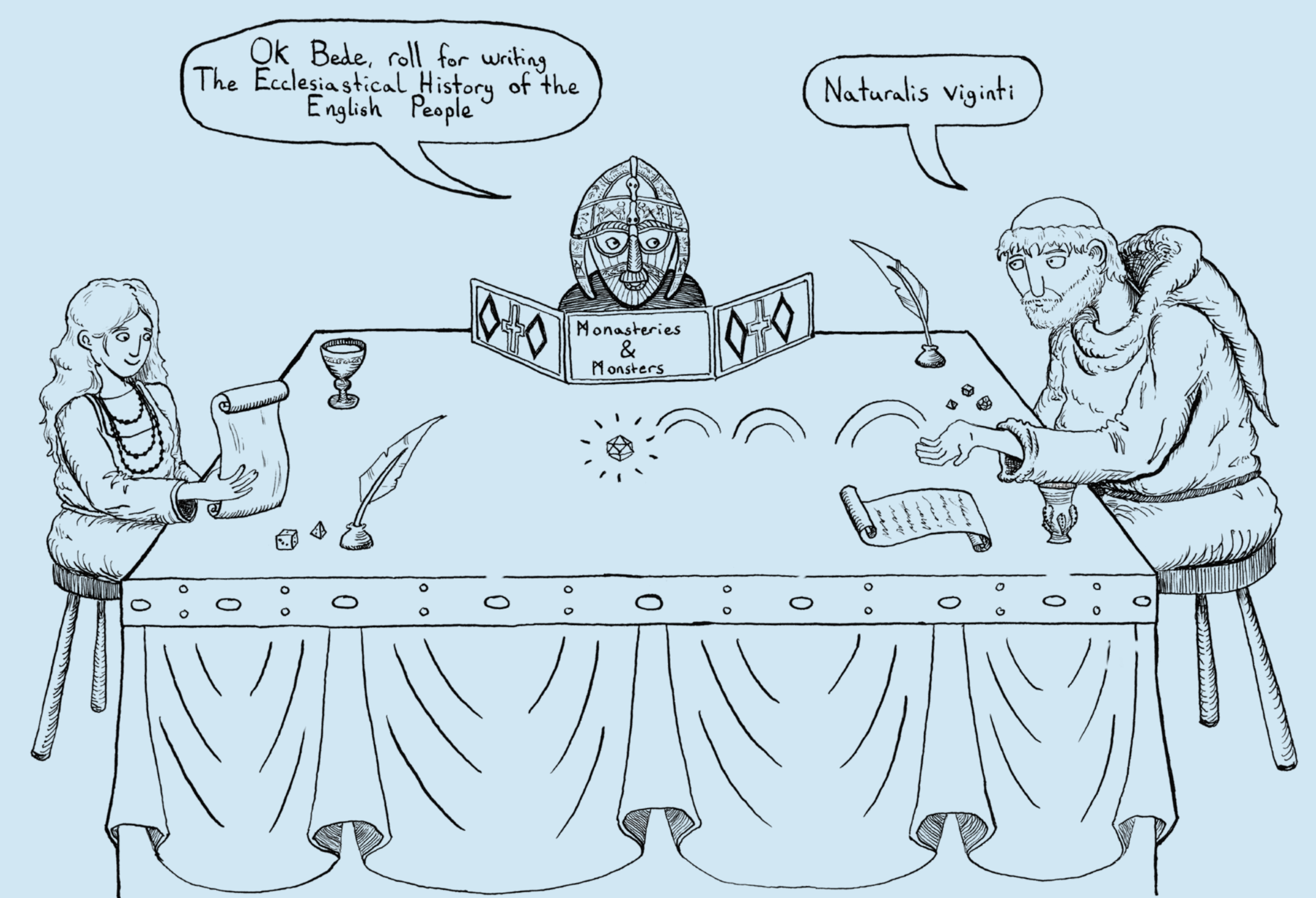
Other themes in both *Beowulf* and Tolkien's novels include good versus evil, as the heroes fight monsters and villains. Tolkien's novels, just like *Beowulf*, explore what it means to be a hero. *Lord of the Rings* teaches us that anyone can be a hero, even if they aren't a strong warrior.

Heroes and Quests

Tolkien's work inspired lots of later works, and many fantasy worlds you might know were influenced by him - as well the Anglo-Saxon world.

Roll for Initiative! - Dungeons and Dragons

The roleplaying game *Dungeons and Dragons*, first published in 1974, took some superficial inspiration from *Lord of the Rings*. The original game included Ents and Hobbits, later renamed to Treants and Halflings respectively. Some suggest that the Ranger class in the game is inspired by the *Lord of the Rings* character Aragorn. However, the game was also inspired by lots of other fantasy authors and their work.



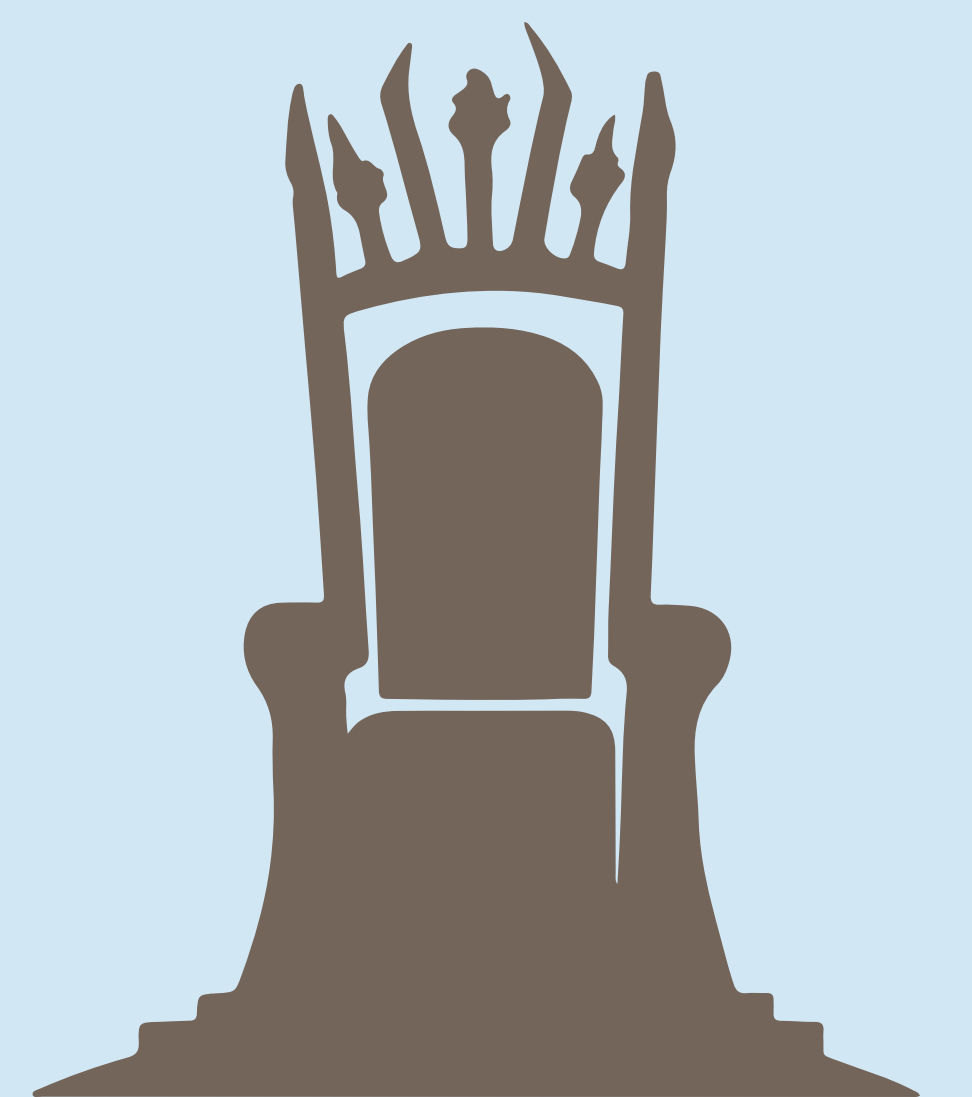
© Bertie Armstrong

As in Anglo-Saxon stories like *Beowulf*, *Dungeons and Dragons* is built around themes of epic quests and fighting monsters.

The Andals and The First Men - Game of Thrones

The seven kingdoms of Westeros mirror the seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. In fact, the power of The North in *Game of Thrones* is similar to that of Northumbria during its golden age in the Anglo-Saxon period. The Andals are loosely inspired by the Anglo-Saxons. They brought the Faith of the Seven to Westeros, like the spread of Christianity in the Anglo-Saxon period.

The series also talks about what it means to be a hero. Ned Stark has all the qualities of a hero as set out in stories like *Beowulf* and the fantasy tales that came later. He is honourable, honest and has a lot of integrity. This makes it all the more shocking when Ned Stark is killed, showing that Westeros is not a world that plays according to the heroic values of other tales.



Black Wings in the Cold

“I used to be an adventurer like you, then
I took an arrow in the knee” - Skyrim

The world of Bethesda's iconic videogame *Skyrim* takes inspiration from Scandinavian and Germanic cultures. The mead halls and warrior culture of *Skyrim* would not be out of place in an Anglo-Saxon tale like *Beowulf*. The town of Whiterun in particular has lots of Scandinavian inspiration, but may also be partially inspired by the settlement of Edoras, the capital of Rohan, in *The Lord of The Rings*.



Psalter, Dragon, Walters
Manuscript W.78, fol. 67r

The game follows established fantasy elements including fate, prophecies, magic, battling dragons and fighting monsters in lairs. All things which appear in *Beowulf*. The dragon language, Dovahzul, is partly inspired by Old English and, more specifically, even a recording of *Beowulf*.



© Bertie Armstrong

Dragon Age

The world of the videogame series, *Dragon Age* has some elements which are similar to the Anglo-Saxon world.

For example, the kingdom of Ferelden is ruled by a monarch who is elected by a council of the nobility known as the Landsmeet. The Landsmeet is the legislative body of the kingdom. This is very similar to the Anglo-Saxon system by which kings were elected by the noble council known as the Witan. The Witan were important in terms of legislation but also had influence in diplomatic matters.



Acknowledgements

The development of this exhibition has been a collaborative effort. We would like to give thanks to:

- North East Museums and Durham University's Museum of Archaeology.
- The Tolkien Society
- Durham University Mythology & Folklore Society
- Bertie Armstrong
- Jay Johnstone
- The Loathsome Worm for allowing us to use their recording of the story of the Lambton Worm made with local children.
- David Lee Jackson





Dedication

**This exhibition is dedicated to the memory of
Laura Sole.**

**Laura was curator at Bede's World and then later
worked at Arts Council England, acting as
Relationship Manager to us here at Jarrow Hall**

**By dedicating this exhibition to Laura, we hope
that all of her work with our Collection and
supporting us through Arts Council is recognised.**

**We are incredibly grateful for everything she has
done for Jarrow Hall. She will be sorely missed.**

