



## The Langdyke Bush by Avril M Morris MA

*'O Langley Bush! The shepherd's sacred shade.'*

The Langley or Langdyke Bush is immortalized in John Clare's poem, written at Helpston in 1821. The tree was an ancient white-thorn [hawthorn] which grew upon a circular mound at the junction of the parishes of Ailsworth, Ufford, Upton and Helpston, close to the intersection of the Roman road, known as King Street, with the ridgeway which links Peterborough and Stamford. According to the Sites and Monuments Record, the mound in question is considered to have served a variety of functions, possibly as a Bronze Age barrow, the site of a Roman shrine, an Anglo-Saxon hundred court and as a medieval place of execution.

Unfortunately, the Langdyke Bush mound has never been officially excavated although Adrian Challands and the late Daniel Crowson conducted a survey in the 1980s, during which they discovered a dressed stone of the Barnack type which was identified as a shrine to an unknown Roman deity. Thus, the occupying powers could have attempted to appease the local population by adopting one of their sacred sites as their own.

The Anglian settlers to the region may also have recognised the importance of the monument and utilized it as an assembly point where they could settle disputes and swear declarations of allegiance. Upon the introduction of Christianity to the area in the mid-seventh century, this pagan religious, and possibly, judicial centre may have been regarded as an attractive place to dispose of heretics and traitors by hanging them between Heaven and Hell at the crossroads. A gibbet remained at the Langdyke mound until it was dismantled shortly before 1721 and the base was removed to Helpston.

The earliest documentary reference to the Langdyke Bush's predecessor, the 'common thorn' appears as a boundary marker in a grant of land at Ailsworth by King Eadred, in 948. However, the open-air court itself is also mentioned in the Land Sureties of *Medeshamstede* [Peterborough] Abbey c972, when Osgode of Badington [Bainton] purchased twenty acres of wood and fields from the abbot 'in the presence of two hundreds *aet Dicon*', a clear referral to the assembly 'at the dykes', where King Street joined the ridgeway.

By the thirteenth century, the Court of the Langdyke Hundred was apparently held biannually at Easter and Michaelmas in order to judge crimes of a serious nature. It was attended by representatives from the parishes under its jurisdiction and was presided over by the Abbot of Peterborough. Nevertheless, the lure of a more comfortable indoor venue gradually become more appealing. By the early eighteenth century, the court was transferred to the building now known as the Exeter Arms at Helpston. It was here, in May 1864, that John Clare's body rested on the eve of his funeral.

A study of all the available archaeological and documentary evidence leads one to conjecture that the Langdyke Bush site may have been used intermittently from prehistoric times until the removal of the gibbet in the early 1700s. According to John Clare, the ancient mound continued to hold the fascination and respect of gypsies and rustic folk alike and it is with great sorrow that he records its disappearance in his journal entry for 29 September 1824. He mourns its demise like the passing of a well-loved friend.

*'To thy declining age I bid farewell  
Like old companions, ne'er to meet again'*

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