## The Lost Book of Barkynge





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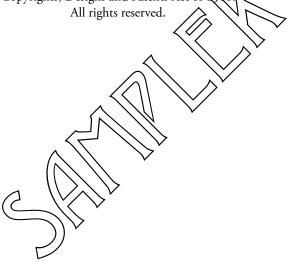
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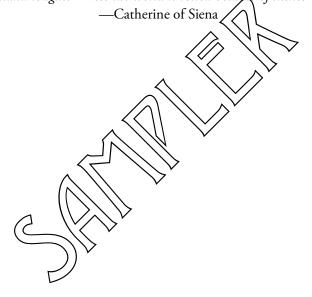
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Part of the terror is to take back our own listening, to use our own voice, to see our own light

—Hildegard von Bingen

We've had enough exhortations to be silent. Cry out with a thousand tongues – I see the world is rotten because of silence



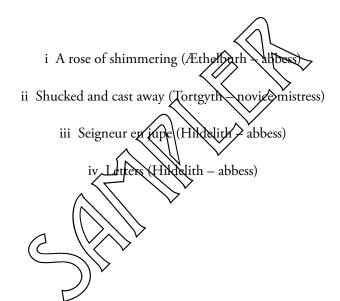
#### Foreword

In his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede refers to a 'libellus' (or *little book*) compiled at Barking Abbey in the early 8th century, but which is now lost. When I first encountered the ruins of the abbey on the banks of the River Roding, I was overwhelmed by a sense of those lost voices. And slowly what had begun as a handful of poems about a favourite river became The Lost Book of Barkynge as first one nun and then the next demanded to be heard. The book traces the history of the abbey from its foundation in 666 to its dissolution in 1539. It includes extensive notes that I recommend to the reader as integral to the text. Barking was a royal abbey and was a centre of learning for women at a time when few other opportunities existed beyond marriage. The poems are an attempt to recover the voices of the nuns, abbesses and local women of the period. They offer a conjectural history but one grounded in thorough research, and though not an exhaustive list, all the abbesses are mentioned in the historical record. Each section begins with a 'hic' (here or this, in Latin) to set the scene of the period. These lyric captions offer a different slant on the usual bullet points of British history. Barking itself is in what we would now call East London but was historically an ancient parish on the Rosing, north of the Thames. There is a marginal note (c.1000) saying per is see boc to Beorgingon' / 'this is the book for Barking Abbey. In the words of Lisa M.C. Weston in her essay 'The Saintly Female Both and the Landscape of Foundation in Anglo-Saxon Barking' this 'book' marked the transformation of secular, dynastic folcland into monastic bocland and it is the inviolable space of that bookland, and the potential it offered the centuries of women that lived there, that this collection endeavours to explore.

Ruth Wiggins

### And so begins nine hundred winters

— 7th century —





#### A rose of shimmering – Æthelburh

And so begins in England, a hundred winters of raising holy villas Æthelburh's brother, soon to hold the bishopric, founds two one at Chertsey for himself, one at Barking for his sister Days of Cædmon and Hild, mother of snakestones at Streoneshalh Æthelthryth at Ely, her sister Wendreda the healer The daughters of Eafe Mildrith, Mildgyth, Mildburh Miraculous escapes across a river protectors of springs and of barley, birds

At Lundenwic the Thamesis cannot move for ice cold on her bed and drifting towards release Æthelburh remembers

Miracles

The translation of unexpected bones at the raising of Berecingchirche Earconwald baptising a goste lyfe releasing him to dust with just the holy water of his bity

This abbey raised for her daughters and for the daughters after From Francia dear Hildelith to guide them

But since they first broke ground

bright lights in the sky sickness inundation

a great palsy among the geese

men labouring in a storm of clay

at Berecingum and Certesi

The sun hiding its face

signs and portents but how to read them

reading in itself an answer a mistlethrush tru-truing in the holly

She hums the old liturgy remembers the sky fires
that brought the yellow plague
how they seemed to chase upon the heels of glaziers
here from Gaul

to teach the art of windows

Apertures into crystal crysoprase and sard

How bloody rain fell

milk and butter turned to blood

Earconwald's letters urging

gather your daughters seclude them

Instead

they opened their doors to the flood

In all charity
how could they not

Even the boy Æsical whom the sisters doted

and none more so than sweet Eadgyth his teacher

( \liftle \Mesica taken

With his last earthly breath he called to Eadgyth

Eadgyth! three times he called

once for each of his too few years

and wondrous! at prayer that-very-moment Eadgyth

did also call out

and then did follow him that he would not have to step

into the light alone

Green the child in the earth no more to hurry into lessons

Green in the earth and sweet

o puzzle soon to join him

We intercede for the dead

Now Earconwald here you come again come to die at Berecingum

Dear brother conveyed in a horse-drawn crib

Old Hæsl steady mare she too outlives you

The brothers at Certesi and from the Bishopric

all noisy for your body

cloak staff your everything

No quiet relic left to honour

a sister's loss

How we sunk our hopes

that sudden rising

remarkable flood apparent interceding

with which we virgins

could not argue weary trunk perhaps fallen upriver

into the flood and

staunching Easy passage then

for them to carry you off

your body to London

and there to rest

Bright glade of grass

a rose of shimmering

This kingdom of the yellow death — its estate pricked out in decades — O world in turmoil — and people — losing faith

A bold comet standing in the autumn dawn and standing for months standing

Old Ofwyth gone

and Thecla

your complaint in the night at the vigil torch moving towards a brighter

light and gone by dawn

Æthelburh asks the last of her daughters where they will have her lay their bodies down

lay down the daughters after they say they cannot answe when praying oracular night! the still unsettled graves tilth freshly leavened by gr

Of a sudden sky like wool combed tt beater

billow lifting from the loom then dipping

(south and west of the chapel

where it does hang in plain view of each astonished handmaiden

And Æthelburh has her answer

Then

#### Shucked and cast away – Tortgyth

And Tortgyth who knew Æthelburh as a child at court came south with her Barking not so different from the wetlands of Lindsey both bounded by marsh and river, birch trees A cloister of birdsong and midges unceasing choir their bellies full of garnets But as when an oyster has been shucked and cast away the shell goes brittle and one half finds itself worked free of the other

We were as sisters embroidery scripture plaiting each other's hair together Æ's good father knew from the start offered he crown or psalter but like her brother she had no use for gold He had us learn togeth time came we left as one and then we took the dvke helong stræt south king our soft way through fen Yound the tracks of brushwood pocked with flint

The look on her face bittersweet and shy
that first day when she raised as Abbess
the sacramental shears
my hair coming away in her hands no need of cutting
body so eager to be humble
just the ritual of her fingers