



# A Day With... a slave named Edith

**W**as it really true? Perhaps it was all a dream. Edith lay there still half asleep, her mind hardly able to credit the changes this day would bring. Today she would be free. Free! No longer a slave? What would it feel like? No-one in her family for as far back as could be remembered had been free. Her thoughts drifted back to the events leading up to today, the day of her manumission.

Born eighteen years before to Wullaf and Aelfeva, thralls on the estate of Eadhelm, a Saxon thegn, she had had as happy a childhood as a girl in her situation could hope for. Her parents were loving, her brothers had been protective of their only sister, and their master had been good to his slaves. To crown her good fortune, Eadhelm had a daughter, Deorwyn, who was about her own age, and the two little girls had been allowed to play together, and as they grew older Edith had become Deorwyn's personal slave.

When Deorwyn reached marriageable age, her father, being a kindly man, gave his young daughter a say in choosing her future husband. Several local men were proposed, but they were all rejected by Deorwyn. Edith had feared for her dear mistress, whom she almost dared to think of as a friend.

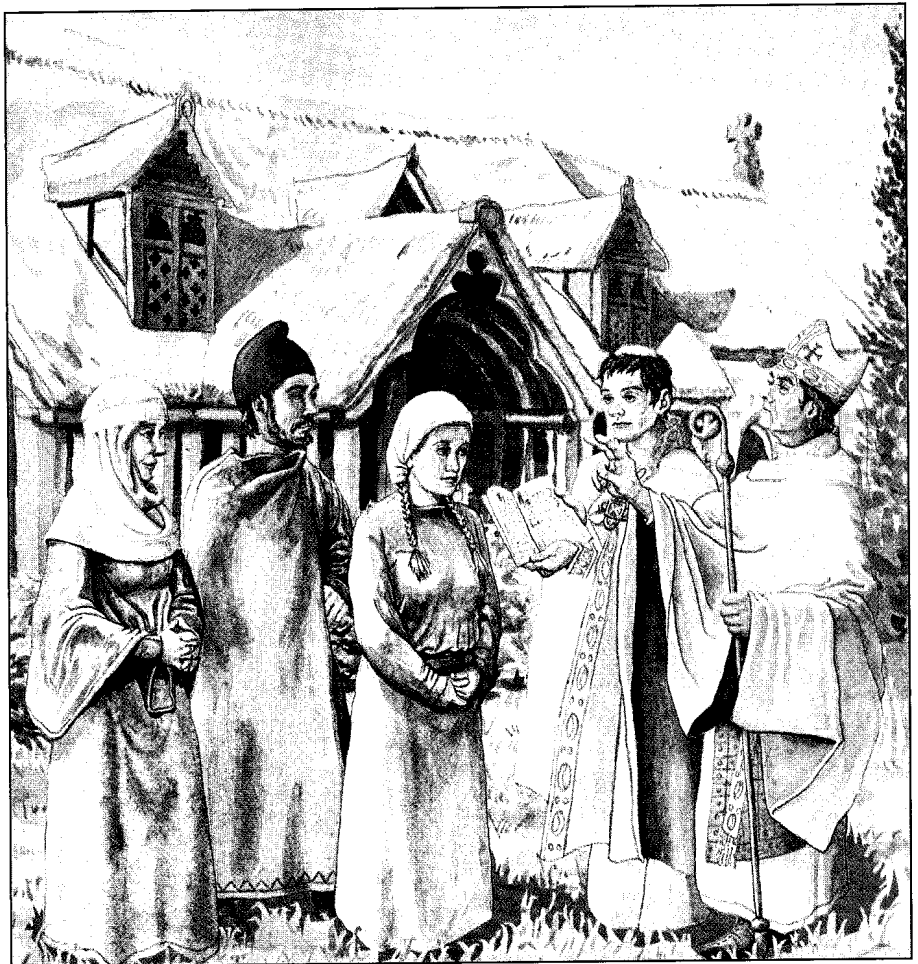
How awful it would be if she made an unhappy marriage. But at last Eadhelm

suggested Siward, the son of an old acquaintance who had died a year or two before. His estate was not too far away, and the young man seemed pleasant enough. So he invited Siward to a feast and introduced him to Deorwyn.

This time she showed much more interest. Siward was courteous and amusing, and, although she had been told that he was a fearless warrior, she had the feeling that he would be a kind and considerate husband. He was also tall, handsome, and, at ten years her senior, a good deal younger than some of those who had offered for her before. To her father's and Edith's relief, she

agreed to the match.

For his part, Siward was willing enough. For years those around him had been urging him to marry, but he had been less than enthusiastic about all the girls so far suggested; some had been extremely unattractive, some of unpleasant temperament. However, he knew that he could not avoid matrimony for ever, so had reluctantly agreed to consider yet another candidate, whom he had not seen since she was a child. To his surprise, however, the girl who was presented to him was not only pretty, but had a sweet nature as well. Before returning home, he had made



up his mind and told Eadhelm of his willingness to marry his daughter.

They were married without delay, and Siward was pleased to find that he had indeed made a good choice. Deorwyn was a good and dutiful wife, but, as he soon discovered, she had a mind of her own. This amused him, and, to his astonishment, he realised that he had indeed fallen in love with her.

Because of this he agreed to most of her requests. However, when she told him of her plan to free her maid from slavery, he had been somewhat taken aback. Although not a cruel man, he had always thought of slaves as a fact of life. It was possible to free them, of course, but neither he nor his father had ever done such a thing. His wife persisted, however, and, knowing that according to the law Deorwyn could have done so without the courtesy of asking his permission, he finally agreed, and preparations were begun.

Edith knew nothing of this until Deorwyn sent for her one day and asked her a very strange question. How would she like to be a free woman? It had been so unexpected that at first she was unsure how to reply. All kinds of thoughts had raced through her mind, but finally, still not fully convinced that her mistress was serious, she had said that indeed it would be wonderful.

Since then the days had passed in a whirl as the necessary arrangements were made. The local priest would be in attendance, plus several other clerics and deacons, various important local personages, and even, to Edith's amazement, Bishop Brictwin. All these people would act as witnesses to the granting of her freedom. Also a brother from the nearby abbey, who prepared the beautiful illuminated manuscripts, would be there to write it all down. It really did seem like a dream.

The ceremony would take place in the late morning to allow time for Edith's family to walk from the estate where they lived. And when the serious business was over there would be feasting and merriment. All for her!

Other people were stirring now.

With a start, Edith realised that unless she hurried she would be late in her attendance on her young mistress. On this

day of all days, how ungrateful that would be! Swiftly she rose and set about her duties. The hours seemed to pass in a flash, and soon it was time to help Deorwyn array herself in her best gown and jewels. When she was ready, her mistress had one more surprise for Edith, a simple but very pretty blue gown.

'Try it on, Edith,' she said, laughing at her maid's astonished expression, 'it's a gift for you on your special day'.

This really must be a dream! Gingerly, Edith slipped on the dress. It felt wonderful. During the ceremony she would feel like a queen. The ceremony! A strange feeling like butterflies fluttering developed in her stomach. But this was no time to give way to nerves for the guests were arriving.

When they were all assembled, the manumission commenced. First Deorwyn, then Siward made formal statements concerning her freedom. Edith was feeling so overwhelmed that she found it difficult to concentrate, but the gist of them seemed to be that from now on everyone must treat her as a free woman, and woe betide anyone who did not. The scribe busily wrote everything down, and the Bishop and the priest, their voices suitably solemn, intoned prayers.

At last the ceremony was over, and the merriment began. Many people came up to congratulate Edith, including some of Siward's slaves who had not hitherto been very friendly to her. They were hoping that similar good fortune might one day befall them, Edith thought with amusement!

One of the guests, a young ceorl named Alwin, was particularly attentive. Edith had always liked him, but had not dared to hope he would take a personal interest in her. But now, to her delight,



he made it clear that he was indeed attracted to her. Was it really possible for one day to hold so much happiness?

'How can I thank you for your kindness?' Edith asked her childhood playmate as the guests departed.

'Don't even try, my dear,' replied Deorwyn. 'But take care of your new dress. I think you are soon going to need it for another special day. When you marry Alwin' she added with a smile.

**Rosemary Bennett**  
Illustrated by David Irwin

## Glossary

**Manumission** = The freeing of a slave. Therefore verb = to manumit.

**Thrall** = An Anglo-Saxon slave. Slavery could result from birth, penal punishment or from becoming a prisoner of war.

**Thegn** = A holder of land, which, by the 10th century, could vary from enormous estates down to quite small ones. A thegn had many obligations, including military ones.

**Ceorl** = A freeman, but one who had many obligations to his lord.

## Further Reading

Andrew Roberts, *Later Anglo-Saxon England*, 1999.

Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England*, 1984.