

The meaning of duzzy is still intact after 1,200 years

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The “Blickling Homilies” is the name given to a collection of 18 ancient sermons which were composed in the late 10th century, probably around AD 970, and perhaps in Worcester.

They were based on earlier Latin sources, but they were written in the Old English (Anglo-Saxon) language; and they constitute one of the oldest surviving collections of English-language homilies in existence.

They are called the Blickling Homilies because they used to be housed at Blickling Hall, near Aylsham; but if you want to see them these days, you’ll have to travel a lot further than that. In 1938, they were acquired by American collector John H Scheide, and are now in the Scheide Library at Princeton University in the USA.

The homilies are said to be “an important literary milestone in the early evolution of the English prose”, and the language they are written in is extremely interesting.

If you have never seen what Old English looks like, you might be interested to look at this short extract from the Blickling Homilies:

‘Gepenc, þu dysega mon, hwæt yfela



■ Blickling Hall used to house the Blickling Homilies.

Picture: MARK BULLIMORE

bebead Drihten æfre.’

A literal word-by-word translation of this into Modern English would go: “Think, thou foolish man, what evils commanded Lord ever”, meaning approximately: “Think, oh foolish man: what evils has the Lord ever ordered to be performed?”

One point of great interest here for people in modern Blickling, and everywhere else in Norfolk, is the Anglo-Saxon word *dysig*, first attested in AD 825, meaning foolish or stupid. The same word occurs in the Anglo-Saxon Bible in the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, where it is written of the virgins that “fif waeren dysige and fif gleawe”, which means ‘five were stupid and five clever’.

We can’t help but be reminded here of the Norfolk dialect word *duzzy*, which means... foolish or stupid. Maybe some readers have even been called a “duzzy fule” in their time. The 1893 publication “Broad Norfolk: being a series of articles and letters reprinted from the Eastern Daily Press”, edited by Harry Cozens-Hardy, cites the expression “duzzy fule” as meaning “a bigger fool than common”. It also contains the very nice admonition not to “stand a-garpin there, bor, like a duzzy mawkin”.

This similarity between *dysig* and *duzzy* is not a coincidence. Our word *duzzy* is a direct continuation of Old English *dysig*, which has come down to us over 1,200 years with its ancient meaning totally intact.