

**The Night  
of  
The Long Knives  
Amesbury  
1st May 472**



# The Night of The Long Knives At Amesbury 1st May 472



**Hengist, of the Night of the Long Knives**

**O**N THE 1ST MAY 472 THE SAXON HENGIST MASSACRED ALL BUT ONE of Britain's Celtic chiefs in an ambush that became known as the 'Night of the Long Knives'. Possibly.

The massacre may not have actually happened, and if it did, there's every chance it wasn't on that particular date - I've gone into more detail about the date of the Night of the Long Knives below - so please take the following with a large pinch of salt!

## The Original 'Night of the Long Knives'

The Saxon Hengist is 'a real historical figure'. He is mentioned by Bede[2], and by the authors of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles - historical sources who are generally seen as being reliable[3].

Bede says that Hengist and his brother Horsa were invited to Britain by Vortigern, a British chief. They settled in Kent, and were seen as the

‘Kings of Kent’. The idea of a Saxon settlement in Kent at this time is supported by some archaeological evidence.

Anyway, as I understand it ‘the Night of the Long Knives’ isn’t mentioned in Bede, nor in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.

The story of the ‘Night of the Long Knives’ comes to us from the less reliable Nennius and from Geoffrey of Monmouth. The story is well told in David Cameron’s favourite childhood book[4], HE Marshall’s ‘Our Island Story’:

But Hengist was as cunning as ever. He sent back a message to Vortigern[a British or Celtic leader] saying that he did not know that Vortimer [an opponent of Vortigern] was dead. "I came to fight for you, to help you to regain your throne," he said. "But now that you are King again there is no need to fight. Let us be friends. Let us all, Britons and Saxons, meet together at a great feast. Let us forget our quarrels and make peace. Then I will go home again with my soldiers."

Vortigern told the British nobles that Hengist wanted to make friends. The Britons really did not wish to fight any more, so they readily agreed to meet Hengist in a friendly way on the Plain of Salisbury, and feast together.

A day was fixed. It was in May. The grass was green and the sky blue, and the birds sang on this bright spring day. From all sides came the British nobles in their gayest holiday clothes, wearing no armour and carrying no weapons.

The Saxons, too, came gaudily clad and seemingly unarmed.

There was laughter, and talk and friendly greeting, and the feast began. Suddenly, over the noise of the feasting, the voice of Hengist sounded loud, "Draw your daggers."

Then every Saxon drew his dagger, which he had hidden in his stocking, and stabbed the Briton next to him. The Britons fought and struggled bravely, but they had no chance. They had only their bare hands with which to defend themselves, for they had not dreamed of such treachery.

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Only two of all the Britons were saved. One was Vortigern, the king, because Hengist had ordered his soldiers not to kill him; the other was Edol, Earl of Gloucester. He found a wooden stake lying on the ground, and defended himself so bravely with it that, it is said, he killed seventy of the Saxons, and then escaped with his life.

After this wicked and cowardly slaughter of unarmed men, Hengist took possession of Britain. His wild, heathen soldiers swarmed all over the land, killing people, burning towns and making terrible havoc everywhere. The Britons fled in terror to the mountains and forests.[5]

According to Geoffrey, Stonehenge was built on or near the site of the massacre as a memorial to the slain.

There is, of course, some doubt as to whether the legendary event ever happened. As mentioned, neither Nennius nor Geoffrey of Monmouth are seen as being reliable historical sources. According to the Dictionary of National Biography

Much of the information thus incorporated [in Nennius *Historia Brittonum*] certainly cannot be taken at face value and there are instances of error and miscalculation by the author; but the final product is a commendable, if problematic, attempt at historical writing based on very limited sources.[6]

Similarly the DNB refers to Geoffrey's apparently impossible claims to be translating from an ancient source, and partly because of the strikingly unhistorical nature of his subject matter.[7]

Geoffrey's Vortigern story, for example, features dragons hiding under a tower.



## **Other 'Nights of The Long Knives'**

The story of the 'Night of the Long Knives' has resonated enough that the phrase has been used as a label for at least 20th Century events[8]:

Hitler's political purge of 1934 ...and more flippantly————

Harold Macmillan's 1962 Cabinet re-shuffle

Canadian constitutional reform in 1981

## **The Date of the Night of the Long Knives**

So given that this is all extremely doubtful, why have I given a date of Mayday in AD 472?.

The day and month of the Night of the Long Knives comes from an 1836 book called *Britannia after the Romans* : being an attempt to illustrate the religious and political revolutions of that province in the fifth and succeeding centuries

The congress for pacification was appointed to be held near Ambri or Ambresbury on Salisbury Plain, a situation sacred in the superstitions of the people. The time fixed was the feast of the Cyntevin or May-day, which was a solemn convention of the heretical hierarchy then existing in Britain[9]

The Oxford English Dictionary, no less, gives us the year of the massacre:

2. Phr. (night of) the long knives : a treacherous massacre (as, according to legend, of the Britons by Hengist in 472, or of Ernst Roehm and his associates by Hitler on 29–30 June 1934); hence used allusively of any similarly decisive or ruthless action.[10]

So, if it did happen, the 1st May in 472 is as likely a date as any for the original 'Night of the Long Knives'. Possibly.

## Footnotes

[2] Barbara Yorke, ‘kings of Kent (act. c.450–c.590)’, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; [online edn, Sept 2011](#)

[3] On the other hand, the same DNB article referenced above makes the point that:

In spite of such details it seems very likely that Hengist and Horsa were mythical founders rather than real personages. Their alliterating names recall other founding figures of Indo-European legend such as Romulus and Remus. The names mean ‘stallion’ and ‘horse’, and the possibility that they were in origin equine deities receives some support from accounts that in nineteenth-century Saxony protective roof-finials in the shape of horse-heads were known by their names.

[4] The Prime minister said that “When I was younger, I particularly enjoyed Our Island Story by Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall, It is written in a way that really captured my imagination and which nurtured my interest in the history of our great nation. Link: Revealed: David Cameron’s favourite childhood book is Our Island Story - Telegraph“

[5] The Baldwin Project: Our Island Story by H. E. Marshall

[6] David E. Thornton, ‘Nennius (fl. c.770–c.810)’, [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#), Oxford University Press, 2004

[7] J. C. Crick, ‘Monmouth, Geoffrey of (d. 1154/5)’, [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#), Oxford University Press, 2004

[8] Night of the Long Knives (Arthurian) - Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia, [URL](#)

[9] Britannia after the Romans : being an attempt to illustrate the religious and political revolutions of that province in the fifth and succeeding

centuries (1836) Herbert, Algernon, 1836, Published by H.G Bohn, Link: Britannia after the Romans

[10] “long knife, n.” OED Online. Oxford University Press, March 2014. Web. 27 March 2014. Link: long knife, n. : Oxford English Dictionary

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