



THE DIG

JOHN PRESTON

'Very fine, engrossing, exquisitely original'

IAN McEWAN

'An enthralling story of love and loss, a real literary treasure. One of the most original novels of the year'

ROBERT HARRIS



The Dig
by
John Preston

Copyright © John Preston, 2007

All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from The Dig

To find out more please visit www.penguin.co.uk

Prologue

Basil Brown

14 June 1939

That evening I came back and worked on alone. The rectangle of darkened earth at the entrance to the burial chamber showed up quite clearly in front of me. I scraped away with the trowel and then I switched to the bodkin. It wasn't long after starting that I came across this greenish band. It was running through the soil like a grass stain. At first, I thought my eyes were playing up. I had to blink a few times before I'd allow myself to believe it.

With the pastry brush, I swept the earth away, taking off as much as I dared. I was worried that if I took any more away the whole thing might vanish completely. But far from disappearing, the green band showed up even more distinctly than before.

Then, to the left of the first one, I found another green band. The colour was a little duller than before – more speckled too – but still impossible to miss. I took these to be the remains of bronze hoops. Possibly belonging to a barrel, or some sort of wooden container.

When I looked at my watch, I saw that it had already gone nine o'clock. I was astonished – I thought I'd been going for about fifteen minutes. The light was fading now.

Even so, I was in a muck sweat. I kept having to wipe my forehead with my sleeve. I knew I was going to have to give up soon. But I couldn't bear to stop. Not yet.

I kept on brushing. More than anything else I wished I'd brought a torch and I cursed myself for not thinking of it before. Just when I had decided that there was no point carrying on, I came across something else. A piece of timber.

To begin with, I assumed this must be the barrel, or what was left of the barrel. It wasn't long, though, before I had second thoughts. The piece of timber was about the size of a large book. Like a ledger, or a church Bible. As far as I could tell, it was perfectly flat. In places, it was so decayed that even my pastry brush was too rough. All I could do was put my lips as close as possible and blow the earth away.

In one place, though, it was quite solid. When I tapped the wood with my finger, it gave out a soft, hollow sound. In the top left-hand corner, I could make out what I thought was a knot. Peering at it more closely, I saw it was a small hole. A dry, papery smell rose from the ground. It caught in my nostrils as I sat staring at the piece of wood, and at the hole in particular.

Then I did something shameful. Something I can never excuse, or properly explain. I pushed my finger through the hole. It went in quite easily – the timber fitted snugly round my knuckle. Beyond was a cavity. Although I couldn't be sure, I felt the cavity to be a large one. There was a kind of emptiness around my finger, like an absence of air.

I stayed where I was for several minutes. By now I could hardly see the wood in front of me, it was so dark. But still I sat there, not moving. And when at last I took my finger

away, all the excitement I'd felt before vanished in an instant. In its place came a great wash of sadness. So strong it quite knocked me back.

After I'd covered over the centre of the ship with tarpaulins and secured the corners with stones, I set off for Sutton Hoo House. The gravel path ran pale and straight in front of me. On one side was a yew tree. I could see its silhouette looming up before me, its branches almost touching the ground. The sky was black as hogs.

When I rang the back doorbell, I could feel the sweat, cold and drying, on my skin. Grateley answered the door. Although he'd taken off his collar, he still had his tail coat on.

'Basil? What are you doing here?'

'Would you tell Mrs Pretty I need to see her?' I told him.

'Now?' He swayed back in surprise. 'Do you know what time it is? Mrs Pretty will be preparing for bed.'

'Even so, I need to see her.'

Behind him, light bounced off the white tiles. Grateley gave me a look. Frowning mostly, although there might have been some sympathy in it.

'I'm sorry, Basil,' he said. 'You'll just have to wait until morning.'

Edith Pretty

April–May 1939

There was a knock on the door.

‘Come in.’

‘Mr Brown, ma’am,’ said Grateley, and then stood aside to let him in.

I am not sure quite what I had been expecting, but it was not this. My first impression was that everything about him was brown – dark brown. His skin was mahogany-coloured. So were his clothes: a cotton tie, a tweed jacket with the top button fastened and what appeared to be a cardigan beneath. He was like a kipper in human form. It seemed absurd that his name should be Brown too.

The only things about him that were not brown were his eyes. Grey, like two polished tacks, they gleamed with alertness. His hair stood up in tufts. He was holding an object in his left hand – brown, inevitably – mashed between his fingers. The other was jutting out in front of him.

‘Mrs Pretty,’ he said.

‘It was good of you to come, Mr Brown.’

‘No, no, no . . .’

His handshake was dry and firm.

‘Won’t you sit down?’ I indicated the sofa.

He did so, but only just, perching on the edge of the seat with his elbows on his knees. The brown object was still in his hand. My gaze was drawn to it. I thought – I am afraid I thought it might be an animal of some sort. Then I realized it was his cap. He must have seen me looking, because he unclenched his hand, placing the cap on the cushion beside him.

‘Mr Brown, you have been recommended to me as someone who knows about soil. Suffolk soil. Mr Reid Moir, the chairman of Ipswich Museum Committee, spoke highly of you.’

He twisted slightly at the mention of Reid Moir, I thought, but nothing more than that. I remembered how Reid Moir had described him as being somewhat unorthodox in his methods. I remembered too how he had also referred to him as a local man, laying a good deal of stress on the word ‘local’. At the time his meaning had passed me by, but now I saw it clearly enough.

‘As you may know,’ I went on, ‘I have a number of mounds on my land. I have been thinking for some time of having them excavated. Mr Reid Moir told me that you might be the man for the job.’

There was no reaction – not at first. Then he said, ‘What do you think might be in your mounds, Mrs Pretty?’

His accent was broad Suffolk, with scarcely any vowels coming through and the consonants all clattering into one another.

‘I am assuming they are prehistoric. Probably Bronze Age. As for what, if anything, may be inside, I would not care to speculate. From what I can tell, they do not appear to have been excavated before. It is rumoured that Henry VII dug for treasure in a mound here. We also know

that John Dee, Elizabeth I's Court Astrologer, was commissioned to search for treasure along this stretch of coast. Some people say he came here too, although there is no evidence of his having done so.'

Again he said nothing. Despite his clothes, there was something oddly spruce about him. Possibly it was his air of containment.

'Would you care to have a look for yourself?' I suggested.

Outside, the landscape was drained of colour. The water in the estuary looked hard and shiny. It might not have been moving at all. Underfoot, the grass was spongy and already damp with dew. I was careful where to put my feet. Mr Brown walked with his arms bowed and his elbows sticking out, as if his jacket was too small.

'This whole area around Sutton Hoo House has always been known as Little Egypt,' I told him. 'No doubt on account of the mounds. There are a number of legends about them. People claim to have seen mysterious figures dancing in the moonlight. Even a white horse. I believe that local girls used to lie down on top of them in the hope of becoming pregnant.'

Mr Brown glanced across at me, his eyebrows rising in two perfectly inverted Vs. 'And have you ever seen any of these dancing figures yourself, Mrs Pretty?' he asked.

'No,' I said, laughing. 'Never.'

A coverlet of mist was clinging to the mounds. When we came closer to the largest of them, Mr Brown made a little clicking sound with his tongue. 'They're bigger than I expected. Much bigger.'

He pointed upwards. 'May I?'

'By all means.'

He ran up the side of the mound, elbows pumping away. When he reached the top, he stood looking round. Then he promptly disappeared. After a few seconds, I realized that he must have knelt down behind a clump of bracken. Then he straightened up and stamped on the ground – first with one foot, then the other. He stayed up on the mound for several more minutes. When he came back down he was shaking his head.

‘What is it, Mr Brown?’

‘You have rabbits, Mrs Pretty.’

‘Yes, I am aware of that.’

‘Rabbits burrow,’ he said. ‘They’re bad for excavations. Very bad. They disturb the soil.’

‘Ah, I didn’t realize.’

‘Oh yes, a real menace, rabbits are.’

After that we went round each mound in turn. Mr Brown paced out measurements, making notes with a stub of pencil in an old diary. At one point a flock of geese went overhead, their necks extended, their wings thumping the air. As he lifted his head to follow them, I saw the sharpness of his profile against the sky.

By the time we had finished the dusk was thickening. Boats were still coming back up the river to Woodbridge, their lanterns lit and their motors chugging. On the slipway, voices were shouting to one another, although only these shreds of sound were audible, not the words.

Back in the sitting room, his hand reached for his jacket pocket. Then it stopped short, hovering above the flap.

‘Do feel free to smoke, Mr Brown.’

‘It’s a pipe,’ he said by way of warning.

‘That’s all right. I don’t mind a pipe.’

He took the pipe out of his pocket, along with a pouch

of tobacco. Once he had filled the bowl he lit the tobacco, then pushed it down with his thumb – the tip was completely black. A low, bubbling sound emerged from the interior of the pipe. When he sucked on it, something extraordinary happened: his entire face collapsed. The insides of his cheeks must have almost touched in the middle. When he exhaled, his face inflated again.

‘Be a big job,’ he said, shaking out the match.

‘I could let you have one man,’ I said, thinking of John Jacobs, the under-gardener. ‘Possibly two.’

‘Two would be better. And scuppits.’

‘Scuppits?’

‘Shovels.’

‘I think we could probably run to shovels.’

A cloud of blue smoke rose and settled above his head. ‘Mrs Pretty,’ he said, ‘I must be frank with you. These mounds of yours have almost certainly been robbed. Most of the ones around here were emptied in the seventeenth century. I wouldn’t want you getting your hopes up.’

‘But would you be willing to try?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes, I would . . . That’s assuming the details could be agreed.’

‘The details, of course. You could lodge with the Lyonses. Mr Lyons is my chauffeur and Mrs Lyons is in charge of the kitchen. There is a spare bedroom in their quarters above the garage. As for money, would one pound, twelve shillings and sixpence a week be acceptable?’

He nodded, almost brusquely.

‘I will arrange for you to be paid each week through the cashier at Footman Pretty’s store in Ipswich. Should you need money for incidental expenses, please let me know. If I am not here my butler, Mr Grateley, can always pass on any

messages. Now then, how long do you think you will need?

‘Four or five weeks should do it. Six at a push.’

‘That long?’

‘I’ll go as fast as I can, Mrs Pretty. But you can’t rush something like this.’

‘No, I understand. My only concern is that we might not have that much time.’

‘Best not hang about, then.’

‘No, indeed. When do you think you could start? Would next Monday be too soon?’

‘I don’t believe it would, no.’

The door burst open and Robert ran in. He came towards my chair, then stopped in the middle of the carpet.

‘Ugh! What’s that disgusting smell, Mama? Has the silage caught fire again?’

‘Robbie,’ I said, ‘this is Mr Brown.’

Mr Brown had stood up. His head came through the smoke cloud.

‘This is my son, Robert,’ I said, standing up myself.

I could sense Mr Brown’s surprise as his eyes went back and forth, from one of us to the other. A flicker of puzzlement before propriety took over.

‘Hello there, young man.’

Robert said nothing; he just kept staring up at him.

‘Mr Brown is an archaeologist,’ I explained. ‘He is going to have a look inside the mounds.’

Robert turned back to face me.

‘Inside the mounds? What for?’

My hands were on his shoulders. As he moved, I could feel the bones shifting beneath his skin.

‘For treasure,’ I said.

*