

The story of Alfraeda the dragon at Bolton Castle

By Dave and Suzy Manning April 2017

Our story begins as all good stories do, with once upon a time. The time we are talking about is so long ago that the country we live in now was very different then, and the people who lived there were different too. Wensleydale, where our story takes place was much warmer, so the animals living there were animals who liked warm weather; elephants, hippopotami, giraffes, lions and crocodiles, not like the animals there today. People were happier too, as they were always warm and there was plenty of food for them to eat. They could not read and write, however, so the story we are about to hear was never written down but told by mothers and fathers to their children, and once the children became parents, they in turn told their children. And that is how the story came down to me; related by an old man who lived here in the valley, a story he had heard from his mother and father.

There was another strange thing about this time, something that grown-ups find hard to understand, but children know the truth of it. Living with all the other animals were creatures that no one has seen for hundreds of years, creatures so strange that most people think that they never existed at all; dragons. Sadly, people today think that if dragons did exist, they were in fact nasty, horrible creatures. But we all know this is not true. Dragons were kindly, friendly and happy animals who especially loved to play with children. On children's birthdays, they would make a special visit and allow the children to climb on their backs and then fly up and down the valley. People today think that dragons were covered with hard scales and felt horrible to the touch. But in fact, their backs were covered with a soft fur which allowed the children to keep warm and hold on tight when they were flying. So, children and dragons lived happily together and could often be seen playing in the fields around the villages where they lived.

Why then, do most children not have dragon friends to play with today? Well, many children could still play with dragons, but the dragons want to hide from grown-ups as they fear what they may do. And there is good reason for this,

because it was the greed and nastiness of some grown-ups that sent many of the dragons away and forced the rest to go into hiding. Without knowing their hiding places, it is impossible for the children to meet up and play with their dragon friends.

To understand how this happened, we must go back to those days long ago, the days when the people were happy and the elephants, lions and the other animals still lived in the valley. Over the years the weather gradually began to change and become colder, so that the animals who liked to live in the warm left the valley and moved away. The dragons, though, could live in the cold and didn't want to move away from the children who were their friends. So, they stayed and lived there happily for hundreds of years.

As the weather continued to change, though, the people became less happy as their houses grew colder and there was less food to eat. At the same time, the king of all the country died and his son took over from him and became King Harold. Sadly, unlike his father who was a kind, gentle man, Harold was mean and greedy and only ever thought about himself. He made people give him money and took their land and houses if they could not pay. The richer he became, the more riches he wanted, and he spent nearly all his time looking for gold and silver. No one liked or loved him and as he grew older he became meaner and greedier. He was scared that when he died, someone else would have all his money and he did not want that to happen. The only way he could prevent it was if he could find a way to be like a dragon and live for hundreds of years. And then the idea came to him; what if he could find a way to be like a dragon? But how could he make this happen? If only he could wave a magic wand and cast a spell, then everything would be easy. But there was one person, of course, who could wave a magic wand: the castle wizard, Ranulph.

As soon as he had thought of this, Harold sent for Ranulph and explained his problem to him. Once King Harold had finished talking, Ranulph rushed back to his room in the castle, where he kept his books of magic, hoping to find a spell that would help the king. Just like everybody else in the kingdom, he was frightened of the king's temper and what he might do if he was unable to help him. Hour after hour he read through his books, often choking on dust, as many of them had lain untouched on the shelves for years. All through that day

and well into the night he read, becoming more and more worried as he could find no trace of a spell that would help solve the puzzle. Tired and yawning, Ranulph looked up from what he thought was his last book and stared out of the window at the light from the new dawn. Just then, the sun's rays landed upon a small volume that had been pushed to the back of the shelf. Ranulph leaped to his feet and fetched it down. Quickly reading through, his eyes suddenly lit upon an old spell that was on the last but one page. Scarcely daring to believe, and holding his breath without knowing it, he read the page again. Yes, it was true! He was saved. He had found a spell and could now make the king's wish come true.

After a long hot bath, and a big breakfast, Ranulph set off to see the king. Harold had gone hunting, but as soon as he returned and found out Ranulph was waiting, he rushed to see him without even bothering to change from his riding clothes. Once Ranulph had finished explaining how the spell would work, the king began to sing and dance around the chamber. The guards, the lords and ladies and everybody else in the room stood there stunned and amazed, as they had never even seen the king smile let alone dance and sing. But just as quickly as he had begun, he stopped, and glared across the room at Ranulph. The king had just thought of a massive problem with the spell. To make the magic work as Ranulph had explained he had to have 40 pairs of dragon's ears. Just how was he going to get them? Nearly everybody loved dragons and would not let any harm come to them. Ranulph, though, had already thought of this. He quickly explained to the king how they could begin blaming dragons for things that went wrong. The lack of food for people was because dragons were eating too much, and the colder weather was because they refused to breathe their fire and warm everybody up. They had to make people believe that dragons were horrible creatures, not the nice and pleasant animals they really were. This would be fake news indeed.

Sadly, the plan worked all too well. Although the children would not believe the horrible things said about their friends, many of the grown-ups became very angry with the dragons, and they began to help the king's soldiers to chase and kill them. Many dragons were quickly killed as they could not believe that the people who had been their friends and had once loved them were now trying

to destroy them. The children raced to help others find hiding places; unknown to many humans, dragons were able to change their shape for long periods and pretend to be something else. Children could see the dragon hidden in the shape, but grown-ups rarely could and only saw what the dragons wanted them to see.

Now, there was a rich man called Lord Scrope who started to build a castle in the valley, which was going to have four towers, one for each corner. While the building was going on, the dragons had all flown away and were in hiding, usually well away from people. Being far away meant they were safe. The dragon that had lived near to where the castle was being built was called Alfraeda, and she had lots of friends amongst the local children. She missed them terribly and they missed her. She could not return, however, as the wicked king Harold was still looking to find one more pair of ears to complete his spell. So desperate was he that although he was very greedy and didn't like to part with any money, he had offered a small fortune to anyone who could bring him what he wanted.

Years went by though, and King Harold was growing very old and becoming desperate as he was still unable to make the spell. Lord Scrope had nearly finished his castle. The walls had been built, as had three of the towers, but before it could be finished, the Christmas holidays came round. The men who worked on the site all went home to celebrate and in those days the celebrations would go on for twelve whole days. The children joined in, but they were still unhappy that they could not play with Alfraeda, and they would happily have given up their presents to have her back and keep her safe.

Sitting round by the warm fire one night, the children agreed that it was time to put things right, so they decided on a plan to find Alfraeda and bring her back to the village to live with them. The big question was where she could hide so that the grown-ups could not see her, and the king would not be able to get her ears. Idea after idea was brought up and then discarded as being impossible or too silly or somewhere that even the grown-ups would think of looking. The children were almost on the point of giving up, when one of the youngest, a girl called Freya stunned them all when she said: "She could be a tower."

The other children stared at her. "A tower?" they asked eventually.

"Yes," she said, "a tower. Lord Scrope has built three towers. Why can't Alfraeda be the fourth? All the workmen would want to take the credit for it and would not dare to tell Lord Scrope it wasn't them."

They all agreed it was a marvellous plan, the only problem being that they had to find Alfraeda before the twelve days of Christmas were over and the men went back to work. Worse still, the only way of finding her was to go out onto the moors at night-time because she would not show herself in the daylight. Now, in those days, nights were very dark and scary because there were no electric lights and no torches, so the only way people could see was by using a candle in a lantern which wasn't really very bright and gave hardly any light. Nevertheless, to help their friend, they decided that they would go out together on to the moors to find her.

As soon as it became dark, they all sneaked out, pushing pillows under their blankets to make their mums and dads think they were fast asleep in bed. After meeting in the village square, the children set off to the moors, looking nervously about with every little rustling noise in the grass or at the screech of owls calling to each other. They were not going to turn back, however, not until they had found Alfraeda, and so they climbed steadily up the steep hill which led out of the village, eventually coming out to the open space of the moor.

Alone and cold, the black night about them nearly impenetrable, what seemed a good idea back in their houses didn't seem so sensible now. They stood huddled together, staring without seeing into the darkness with their ears straining to hear the slightest sound. After what seemed hours, Freya noticed a faint light growing in the east. Dawn was nearly upon them, and they would have to get back before their parents woke up to begin the day's work in the fields and the cottages. It was then that Thomas heard it; the faint swishing sound that became louder and louder, and out of the gathering light there loomed a huge shadow which, with a thunderous beating of its wings, settled gently on to the ground just a few metres away; Alfraeda had found them. The children rushed forward as a group, cheering and clapping and swarming all around the huge dragon, while she sat purring and twisting around, trying to

give each one of them a lick with her massive tongue. It was some time before things had calmed down enough for the children to outline their plan to Alfraeda as to how she could disguise herself as a tower and come to live with them. If it was going to happen, though, tomorrow night was the last chance, as the twelve days of Christmas were nearly over, and all the men would be going back to work in two days' time. Alfraeda was so pleased with their idea that she could hardly wait, and the children had to stop her from going down straight away as she might be easily spotted by the grown-ups in the gathering light. Making plans to meet the next day at midnight, just to the east of the castle, the children rushed off to return to their homes while Alfraeda went to spend her last day out on the moor.

The day seemed to last forever, but eventually night came and darkness fell, and the children all went off to bed. Just as they had done the previous night, they placed cushions under their blankets so their parents would think they were fast asleep, and then made their way towards the towering bulk of the castle. They had not been there long when the faint swishing sound they knew so well began to grow louder and louder, and suddenly there she was dropping out of the dark to land gently in front of them. Alfraeda had come home. It was the work of moments before she placed herself in the space waiting to be filled by the tower and had they not known it was Alfraeda, the children would have been unable to tell it was really her, and not just a big pile of stones. Resuming her dragon shape, Alfraeda and the children played together for the next few hours, only finishing their games as the light began to show in the east once more.

So Alfraeda disguised herself as a tower, and the workmen who walked into the castle courtyard the day after twelfth night could not believe their eyes. They sent for the Master mason, William, to come and see what had happened. He stared up at the tower, walked around it, touched it and pulled and tugged. It was perfect in every way, and all the men were happy because they knew that Lord Scrope would give them extra money for having finished so early. The story of how the tower was built without anybody building it became part of village folklore, the stories that parents tell their children during the long winter nights. Alfraeda stayed in her disguise for more than two hundred years,

happy and safe, and each new group of children told the next group, but strangely as the children grew up to become adults, they stopped believing in dragons and were no longer able to see Alfraeda.

And so, like all good stories, we might now be able to say:

“They all lived happily ever after.”

Only children could see Alfraeda; the wicked King Harold and the wizard Ranulph had both died long ago without ever having the chance to make their horrible spell; grown-ups no longer believed in dragons, so nobody was hunting or chasing them anymore. But for Alfraeda and the village children, the arrival at the castle of a boy called Richard meant that everything was about to change. He was older than most of the others, and like the old king, Harold, he was mean and greedy and enjoyed getting people into trouble. Although they tried to be his friend, the children found it very hard to like Richard; he constantly told lies, took things that didn't belong to him, was lazy and forced others to do his work, and was never kind to anybody. None of the grown-ups liked him either, and when he had been at the castle for only a few months, Lord Scrope, the great, great, great grandson of the man who built the castle, became so fed up with his naughty behaviour he decided to teach him a lesson. Consequently, after he had once more failed to do the jobs he had been given, Richard was taken by the soldiers on guard and put outside the castle. He was told he would have to stay there on his own until morning, and all he had with him was a flagon of water, a chunk of bread and a blanket to wrap himself in.

Alone, cold and feeling thoroughly frightened and miserable, he wrapped his blanket around him, huddled beneath some bushes by the castle wall, and waited for the night to end. Gradually he drifted off to sleep, even though it was a stormy night, with strong winds whistling around the castle and finding their way into any small gaps or spaces as strong winds always do. It was a strange noise that woke him, and as he looked up into the growing light of a new dawn, the sight he saw convinced him that he must still be asleep and dreaming. For the creature growing rapidly larger in front of his very eyes was none other than a dragon. But it couldn't be, could it? Everybody knew that dragons only existed in story books; in fact, he had once seen a picture of one;

and do you know, it looked exactly like whatever it was that was now swooping over his head and turning into A tower!!!? Now he knew he must be dreaming, but as he watched, a memory came back to him of something he had read in the book with the picture; dragons had the power to change shape.

What should he do? If he went and told the lord, he might get into the most fearful trouble for telling stories, but he was more and more convinced that what he had seen was not a dream and that if he could show Lord Scrope that it was true, he might be given a big reward and not have so many jobs to do around the castle. Most people would have stopped to think it over, but Richard was so silly that his greed overcame his commonsense and he leapt to his feet and shouted to the guards to let him in. It was not yet time to open the gates, but Richard was making so much noise that the guards decided to open up. As soon as he was past the gate and the portcullis was raised, he raced across the courtyard, up the two flights of stairs to where Lord and Lady Scrope lived and demanded that their personal guard let him in to the Solar to see them. The big, burly guard was having none of it and stood in the doorway, blocking Richard's entrance. And there he might have stayed, but Lord Scrope, annoyed at all the noise going on came to the door to find out what was happening. Richard quickly told his story, and to begin with Lord Scrope was tempted to throw him into the dungeon for a few days to try and stop him telling such outrageous lies. But the more he thought about it, the more he wondered whether he should go and check, because surely the boy wouldn't be so stupid as to tell a lie as big as this, would he? A dragon? Surely it couldn't be true, but he would go and find out; and if Richard was trying to make a fool of him, then he would make sure that he regretted it later.

Calling his servant, Lord Scrope sent him hurrying to the guards' tower with instructions to bring six armed soldiers straight away. Pulling on his boots, he reached for his cloak and his sword and turning towards Richard commanded him to lead the way. Richard rushed back down the stairs to the courtyard, and stood looking towards the portcullis, waiting for the guards. He turned back to watch Lord Scrope who was stood, wrapped in his cloak, glowering down at him. The sudden noise of metal on metal as swords were drawn from scabbards turned his attention back to the gate. Six armed men were hurrying

across the yard to join the lord and Richard. It looked as if Alfraeda, after all these years of freedom, was finally going to be caught.

Luckily, though, for Alfraeda and all the children, Henry, one of the youngest boys in the castle had been making the fire in the Solar when Richard had burst in with his story. Henry could not believe that any child could do such a thing but seeing that Lord Scrope was paying no attention to him, he crept from the Solar, ran along the passageway and through the Great Chamber, and on down the back staircase to the courtyard. He must have looked funny to the children who were there doing their early morning jobs, collecting firewood and water for the kitchens, as he was red in the face and puffing from having run so fast. Their amusement turned to alarm as he told his story, and hearing raised voices coming from the courtyard they rushed past the storerooms and the well to the base of the kitchen tower. There they shouted to Alfraeda, warning her of the danger and that she should fly away. It was just at that moment that Lord Scrope, Richard and the soldiers came through the doorway under the Great Hall and turned to look at them.

There are many different accounts of what happened next, and eventually the grown-ups agreed that they must have been seeing things or that they had drunk far too much ale the previous night; because they soon decided that they could not possibly have seen the tower of the castle unravel itself into a dragon, and with a few huge beats of its wings send enough air to knock them all over and to launch itself into the sky. By the time they had all recovered there was a large space where the tower had been and the dragon was a faraway dot in the sky, growing rapidly smaller and smaller. If the story ever got out that they had seen a dragon, without actually having a dragon to show people, they would be laughed at and humiliated and everyone would think they had gone completely mad. Better to keep quiet and tell them that the tower had collapsed in the storm the previous night. There were plenty of stones that had made up the bottom part of the tower lying about to make people believe it. And do you know, that is the story still told to this day. Any guide taking people around the castle will point to the space and tell the visitors that the tower collapsed in a great storm several hundred years ago.

But we know better, don't we?

And there our story should have ended. Because of some wicked, but mainly thoughtless people, the dragons have been forced to hide and thousands of children over the last few hundred years have grown up never having known or played with one; but Alfraeda and the remaining few dragons are still out there and to those children who really believe in them, they can still be seen. And so, our story does end, not in the distant past, but just Over twenty years ago, when the current owner of the castle, Lord Bolton, decided to plant a maze in the garden to celebrate two thousand years of history, the millennium. In the field next to the castle a sculptor also decided to carve a dragon out of a tree trunk, and you can see it in the field to this day. So how does that affect our story and its ending? Well, Alfraeda has never been far away, and having seen the wooden dragon in the field and hearing the story of Alfraeda, some children wondered if a dragon really had lived in the castle, and would she come back and play with them. One day, just like the children of old, they went on to the moor and called to her. Hearing children's voices after such a long time Alfraeda was very happy and flew swiftly down to meet them. They had scarce dared to believe it, but now the children could see for themselves that the stories of old were true. They begged Alfraeda to come back and play as she had in the past, but their problem, however, was the same one the children had six hundred years ago when the castle was being built; where could Alfraeda hide? It was two sisters, Sophie and Faye who came up with an answer. They needed a space big enough to hide a large body and a long tail, so how about using the new maze which had just been planted; it would be the perfect place. Alfraeda could lie in the garden all day with her tail disguised as the bushes. The children could then play with her without any of the grown-ups knowing what was happening. At night-time when everyone had gone home, she could stretch her wings and fly off to find food and be safely back in the garden by morning. After all these years, Alfraeda had returned to her castle home, and once more groups of children could play happily with her.

If you talk to a grown-up, though, they will scoff at the story of a dragon and tell you that all the laughing and giggling out in the garden is simply children running around a maze.

Did I say our story had ended? Maybe I was wrong.

