

WHAT THE WIND SAW

**SHORT STORIES FROM THE HEART
OF HERTFORDSHIRE**

ZOË JASKO

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Author photo by **Andrew Mason**

Map of 'Middle Hertfordshire', cover design and section image
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This is a work of fiction. Certain characters in this work are historical figures and the events in which they are portrayed are used imaginatively. All other characters are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

For

Peter Waine

Who helped with this book in so many ways

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoë has lived in beautiful places including Devon and the French Alps, but it is the picturesque and comfortable lanes, fields and villages of the Hertfordshire countryside around where she has brought up her family, that has provided the inspiration for *What the Winds Saw*. A trained singer, she is co-founder and creative director of the Hertfordshire based Felici Opera.

Zoë has a BA in French and History (University of Exeter) and an MA in Victorian Studies - 19th Century art, history, and literature (Birkbeck College, University of London). She has been an active member of a marvellous book club since 2008.

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Andrew Mason



ENDORSEMENTS AND REVIEWS

“Zoë Jasko creates a wonderfully evocative atmosphere through these stories inspired by the history, folklore and landscape of the remarkable county of Hertfordshire. Turning points are explored through the personal, everyday lives of its residents past, present and future that we can all relate to.”

Emma Harper
Curator, Welwyn -Hatfield Museum Service

“Beautifully written and very lyrical like the musician that you are. The writing made me feel safe and warm”.

Lucy Gravatt
Journalist and Communications Director

“These stories are extraordinary, each one a mini masterpiece, each competing to be a personal favourite. Each is somehow spiritual in its own way. The reader enters a field, turns a corner and watches a mini play, with different sets and from different periods. Beware the casual reader; the stories are deceptively simple. It is easy to access the stories at different levels and each is fulfilling. What I am trying to say at midnight is that I have never read a book quite like this one. The small area of England comes to life, is populated by those in the stories and no one can visit, seek out, those spots and not think of these stories and wonder if perhaps they were all true at some moment in time, two thousand years ago, 50 years ago, or at a moment which corresponds with no time as we measure it in conventional terms.”

Peter Waine
Author and former national chairman of CPRE

FOREWORD

How wonderful to have so many fascinating short stories written about one's own county in one great book. That is exactly what we have in *What the Wind Saw*.

Hertfordshire is The County of Opportunity, but it is also one of great diversity - possibly the most diverse county in the country. What we learn from Zoë Jasko's book is that this has always been the case throughout history.

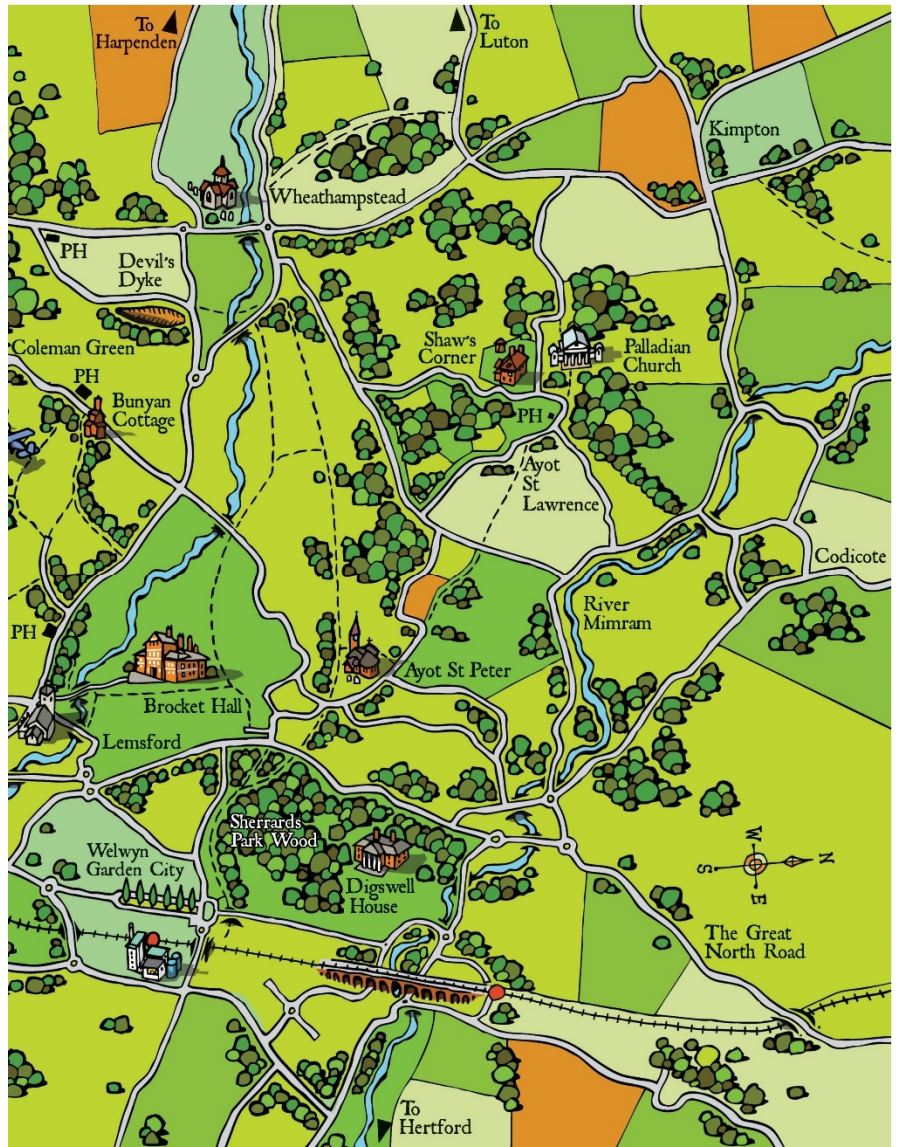
Having a glimpse of the history that surrounds Middle Hertfordshire through numerous stories spanning many centuries is entertaining but at the same time educational. The way in which Zoë Jasko brings history to life in each story is wonderful and to know that these are stories taking place on my own doorstep makes it more poignant. And there is even a story about my boyhood hero - the great archaeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler.

Separating into the four parts - Villages, Towns, The City and Fields, Land and River adds to the interest and like many with each story I have been saying to myself... "I know these places well."

In future, I will wonder what the wind blowing through the trees of Hertfordshire has seen...

Robert Voss CBE CSTJ
HM Lord-Lieutenant of Hertfordshire





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PROLOGUE

I know this county like the back of my hand. This river, just here, look! the Lea – see how it winds its way through the fields and woodland to Wheathampstead where Julius Caesar fought the great Cassivellaunus. Now look here to the Abbey on the hill, that's where your country created its first Christian martyr – Alban. Hold my hand, just for a few seconds, and here, now, do you see it? the Hatfield oak where a young, imprisoned heir learned she would be Queen? Keep your eyes wide open or you'll miss it. Don't blink. Quick! look down there, do you see the students spilling from the campus buildings? A University now but just a few seconds ago the land beneath was the launchpad for four thousand mosquitos to take to the skies.

Ssh ssh! What do you hear? The waves in the trees? The trees in the waves? Or is it nothing – stillness – silence?

I have seen it all. I have heard it all – before. All. Before.

Heorotfrod sir – rolls off the tongue, doesn't it? Hertfordshire.

I saw it arrive. I brought it on a black cloud. I carried the merchants and the sailors who bore the fleas on their clothes, on the backs of the rats on the ships. I filled the sails and carried the pestilence to England. I touched the bodies of the ill and the immune and saw the boils and pustules. I carried the cries of the dying and the tears of the grieving, the bells tolling. I carried the silence.

When the sickness had finished eating the population so much had changed. Although few could count, it seemed that half the world was buried leaving the remaining half to demand more payment for their labour and to claim their liberty. How strange that death was the price for freedom to seek life elsewhere. Time covered the dead villages into

mounds and I helped, laying soil and leaves whilst I watched the villages that lived.

“Complicit!” I hear you cry. No, don’t forget, it is as I told you, I have seen it before. Take the Romans. I helped them on their journey too. How else did they reach Britannia from Gaul? Surely you don’t think they rowed? Great villas with beautiful mosaics and hypocausts they built, roads and bridges. But they left. The Roman Empire withdrew and I helped Time cover its tracks. I spread the grass seed. I blew the Hawthorne. I felled the weaker trees and allowed the saplings to find new homes. I took the bee to the flower, showed the bird its nest. I will be here fiercer with breath of fire or of ice – you choose – when you have brought your world to the brink of destruction by burning your fuels.

I see you as you walk in this land as I visit the villages, the fields, the towns, the city. I am the air that you breathe, the gas you exhale. I know your thoughts and your fears, your loves, and your triumphs. I see the hidden things which you cannot see but which have always shaped this land. I touch your cheek when you cry and spin the falling autumn leaf for you to catch and make your wish.



PART 1: VILLAGES
WHEATHAMPSTEAD

1.

CASSIVELLAUNUS

A breeze toyed with the calf's hide opening to the tent and through it, the man imprisoned within could make out the leg hair and scabbards of the two soldiers who stood guard over him. The sound of horses whinnying and the harsh scrape of stone sharpening a metal blade were the only signs of the soldiers and prisoners invisible to him beyond the tent's mouth.

The day was bright outside, but inside it was dark. He had been held in here for many hours now and his eyes had become used to the gloom. A candle on the table flickered in the draught, creating shadows that fought with those made by the daylight filtering in at the calf's hide opening. Furs carpeted the floor. A standard, not his own, took the position of a throne, dominating the interior; a golden eagle effigy, the might of Rome.

A piece of bread and a lump of goat's cheese remained untouched on the plate which a guard had delivered not yet an hour ago. An empty cup and a full pitcher of mead stood alongside it. Cassivellaunus rose stealthily from where he had been sitting quietly on the bench, observing the hidden blades of the guards at the entrance. Without a sound, he moved to the table and snatched the bread from the plate. He stuffed it angrily into his mouth, as if he had been waiting in ambush and was now making a swift and deadly attack. He wiped the crumbs from his lips with his leather wristband.

Silently, he moved to the entrance, where he stood motionless, looking down at his strong hands. He clenched his right hand tight and looked down at his knuckled fist. It was a rock. He could use it to pound the nearest guard. By taking the pair by surprise, he could wrest their blades from their scabbards before they even had the chance to draw. He could plunge the steel into their soft flesh and make his escape. He was so close to their bodies on the other side of the flapping calf's hide, that he could smell their stale odour, he could breathe their breath. The regular tap-scrape-tap of stone against blade persisted in the background, a macabre bird song in the landscape.

But ambush now would be suicide and suicide was not his battle plan. He had too much cunning. Cassivellaunus, leader of the strong and terrible Catuvellauni, uncurled his fist slowly, finger by finger.

He returned to the table and picked up the goat's cheese and ate, this time slowly, ponderously. The golden eagle standard was his dining companion, golden feathers gleaming in the candlelight.

“What kind of man are you Caesar?” he asked the eagle under his breath.

The eagle did not reply. It stared pointedly forward with its lifeless golden eyes.

Cassivellaunus knew the answer. Julius Caesar was a man such as himself – a man of power and passion, of lusts and deceits. If Caesar was an eagle, then he, Cassivellaunus, was a falcon. They were both akin, two birds of prey, ruling their

skies, ruthlessly. Today, at this hour, at this point in the history of his land, the eagle may have the falcon caught by its tailfeathers, pinning its rival to the ground by its mighty claws, but the falcon had trounced the eagle before. It could do so again.

Not so long ago, when the Roman army had crossed from Gaul, landing their boats on the shores of the southern coast and the legions had marched north in arrogance, the Britons had waited. They had refused to be drawn into battle. Instead, they drew the invading force inland, and flirted with them, daring them to cross the estuary of the river Tems, portraying themselves as a weak maiden easily plucked on the other side of the water. When the invaders rushed forward in their lust, their ships were pierced by the Britons' stakes planted just below the waterline. Caesar departed - defeated.

But an eagle will not stay away, not where it senses prey for the taking. Caesar returned with greater forces, more legions, more ships, more cavalry. He pushed northwards, advancing unchecked on the lands of the Catuvellauni. Britons are fickle friends. The neighbouring tribes, the Cenimagni, the Segontiaci, the Ancalites, the Bibroci, the Cassi, all threw in their lot with the enemy and led Caesar to Wheathampstead and so to Cassivellaunus. Backstabbing, murderous thieves - these once allies assisted the Romans in the slaughter of the Catuvellauni. In the woodland alongside the River Lea British blood had been spilt. In the great ditches, which the tribe had constructed generations before to protect themselves from such attack, life blood had flowed from body to mud, to water.

The tent flap parted and one of the two guards entered.

“Stand up,” he barked in his foreign tongue, motioning to Cassivellaunus to rise from the bench. Cassivellaunus did so, but in no great hurry, and with indifference rather than with respect. The guard sneered at his prisoner and gripped his blade tighter.

“Caesar comes,” the guard announced.

The calf’s hide tent flap parted for a second time and a tired man with a thin face entered. His skin was pulled tight across his features as if there was not enough flesh to accommodate the unusual square shape of his skull. His bird-like eyes pierced the gloom of the tent, searching for the prisoner.

A second man followed behind; a weasel-faced man with an arrogant look in his dark eyes. He waited at Caesar’s shoulder, assessing Caesar’s stance towards the prisoner and the prisoner’s response to Caesar. Cassivellaunus recognised the weasel, it was Commius, the client King of the Atrebate tribe, they had met before and their mutual contempt was profound.

The eagle and the falcon locked gaze; seconds passed. Caesar motioned to the guard to bring him his seat, a carved wooden chair covered in furs, that had been positioned unobtrusively in the corner of the tent. The weasel-faced man placed a stool next to Caesar for himself to sit on. The furniture arranged, Caesar indicated without words for the two men to take their seats.

Caesar sat calmly, his eyes never leaving the face of the prisoner King. To Cassivellaunus, his captor did not seem a typical soldier, he was not brawny and muscular, he did not radiate energy and action. His scrawniness was surprising, he seemed more a fledgling chick than an Emperor of the sky.

“You may begin,” Caesar said to Commius in an unknown knot of sounds and then sat back in his chair, to be entertained by the combat or to be judge and jury at the test now set.

“Cassivellaunus, Caesar wishes to treat with you,” weasel-faced Commius began.

“Is that so, Commius? You do surprise me!” Cassivellaunus replied his words laced with sarcasm.

“I will lay out the terms,” Commius replied, ignoring the Briton chief’s scorn.

“As you please.”

“Caesar demands tribute and hostages.”

“No doubt.”

Cassivellaunus kept his eyes fixed on Caesar during the exchange until he was certain that his captor could not understand the language Commius spoke.

“How much tribute?” Cassivellaunus asked Commius.

“One in ten of the bags of coins in your treasury in the first instance.”

That was worth indeed to be forced to part with, but not the worst of what Caesar was demanding.

“And hostages?” he asked on the edge of his breath.

“Your son and your nephews.”

Cassivellaunus willed his body not to flinch at the Roman demand. Coinage would be irritating to lose, but gold could be plundered from elsewhere. His son and his nephew, no, nothing would make him give these up to Rome, nor would he show to Caesar what they meant to him.

“And you Commius? What is in this arrangement for you?”

“Nothing more than the pleasure it gives me assist with your surrender.”

Cassivellaunus had no belief in the snake’s words.

“And none of the coinage? Not even a slice of power?” he said, his voice full of calm hatred.

“I will accept what it pleases Caesar to bestow on his humble servant,” Commius replied smoothly.

“As you did before, when you humbly accepted to rule the Atrebate tribe, and benefit from their wealth. You are no more than a vile client.”

“It will be as Caesar wishes.”

Cassivellaunus saw it clearly now. Commius, Caesar’s Gallic ally, a wheedling, power-hungry, pretend-servant, had greater ambitions than the lands of the Atrebates.

“The Catuvellauni?” he breathed incredulously, hardly daring to believe the gall of the man, to gain so much favour with Caesar, that Caesar would reward him with Cassivellaunus’ own lands and people.

“Oh no, Cassivellaunus, Caesar is inclined to let you keep your tribe, if you pay him what he asks,” Commius replied in his most pleasant and agreeable manner.

Perhaps, he was wrong then, perhaps the Atrebates’ lands, pastures and coins satisfied Commius. Whatever murky scheme lay in Commius’ mind, it was still hidden by mist.

“You may tell Caesar that I will grant him the coins, but I will not hand him my son and nephews. He asks too much.”

Throughout the exchange Caesar had regarded both men quietly; still, as a fisherman waits for the trout to swim into the nets, as a hunter waits for the wild boar to approach within range of the throw of a spear. He was an observer. He was watching a play which he was directing.

The message translated, Caesar laid his hands flat on the table in front of him and stood up slowly.

“Tell Cassivellaunus I will let him keep his son but he must select fifty young men and fifty young women to take his son’s place as hostages.”

Commius translated Caesar’s words to the sullen Briton, who took the pronouncement as one drinks sour wine or who has no choice but to eat rotting food.

“Come, Commius, we will leave him to consider for the time being. You will return to Cassivellaunus before noon to collect his answer and then bring it to me.” Caesar ordered.

The two men exited the tent; Caesar carrying the cares of a great leader on his wizened brow, Commius with the smirk of a man used to rising through the fall of others.

When they had left, the vanquished king pulled his fingers into a tight fist, a rock with which to pound his enemy. He slammed it angrily against the palm of his other hand and ground the bone of his fingers against the flesh of his hand, imagining how he would grind Commius, how he would grind Caesar, if he could escape and call on Briton forces still friendly towards him. Then, slowly, he uncurled each finger of his clenched fist one at a time, considering his options.

His pointing finger: to send secretly for aid from the Kings of Kent - Cingerotix, Carvilius, Taximagulus, and Segovax, they would have no wish to have Rome established here. A surprise attack could see the Romans chastened and forced to withdraw, but he would be indebted to these untrustworthy British allies.

His tall third finger: to accept the terms of surrender, make payment of coin and flesh, leaving his pride bruised but his kingdom intact.

His fourth ring finger: autumn was on the cusp of turning to winter, Caesar would surely be well advised to make a swift departure and to march his soldiers back to

Rome while the weather held. Cassivellaunus' tribute of gold and slave hostages would be sure to follow.

Or maybe not.

Cassivellaunus, King of the Catuvellauni kissed his fourth ring finger. His decision was made. He poured mead from the pitcher into the tankard and drank deeply. He would pretend to agree to the terms of the treaty, but he would never send the hostages, and would only send the gold if the Romans' presence on the British Isles was fully established – and that might never happen. With a smirk on his face that matched that of Commius', Cassivellaunus waited for that weasel-faced man to return for his answer.