— CHAPTER ONE —

# The Salvation of St Felix

According to an old folk tale, when a ship carrying St Felix of Burgundy was wrecked in a storm on the River Babingley in Norfolk in 615 CE, the saint was saved from drowning by a colony of beavers. In gratitude he consecrated the chief beaver as a bishop. The village, which is now abandoned, records this event on its signpost where a large beaver wearing a bishop's mitre administers to another more junior candidate.

But beavers have no patron saint, and while others have blessed their utility, once Felix was saved he never looked back.

Although in modern times humans and beavers have as species a relationship of great interwoven complexity, like Felix we have long forgotten their abilities. In western European landscapes that we've adapted utterly to suit our multifarious needs, beavers until very recent times have been absent. We killed them. Nearly all. The

prospect of us tolerating them building dams from the maize they pinch from arable fields, chopping down ornamental cherry trees in public parks, punching their deep burrows into flood walls, undermining roads or stuffing the outflow pipes from our sewage farms full of septic waste is beyond what we know. Beavers perform these ancient behaviours in modern environments where watercourses are narrow or shallow because the 40-million-year-old circuit boards in their heads instruct them to do so. To ceaselessly engineer their surrounding landscapes to ensure they suit their purpose.

While coexisting with beavers is, for those living now, a novel experience, prehistoric people knew the beaver well. Archaeological studies demonstrate that early settlers in Britain preferentially selected beaver-generated environments for their abundance of fish, waterfowl, large herbivores and other prey. If they incorporated islands then all the better, as these features protected the hunters from becoming the hunted at a time when the big cats were still kings.[1] Crannog dwellers in Britain lived and built their dwellings on the top of former beaver lodges. They walked out into their wetlands to gather gnawed timbers, sharpened into ready-made posts, and utilised them for structures of their own.[2] Some of the earliest animal effigies ever discovered worldwide are of beavers, and images of the Eurasian beaver's North American relative, *Castor canadensis*, feature strongly in the mythology and legends of many indigenous peoples and their art.[3]

Beavers are the second largest species of rodent in the world. They are famous for their large front teeth, which they use to fell trees for dams, lodges and food. Although capable of dropping trees up to a meter in diameter, beavers will preferentially select much smaller material. They are an aquatic species, well adapted for a watery lifestyle. If well maintained, their near-impermeable coats can trap a bubble of air around them when they dive. Beavers are also vegetarian; they never eat fish, choosing instead to browse on a diet of grasses, forbs and other aquatic plants in the spring and summer before switching to the bark of the fine upper branches of trees or shrubs in the autumn and winter. They do not hibernate and must therefore work hard to form a cache of this material which they sink, stick and weave into the mud of the water body next to their abodes, before the advent of snow or ice prevents its gathering. They rely near completely on this established reserve for survival until the warming soils of springtime prompt fresh new growth.[4]

As I've witnessed many times, beavers are caring creatures. They love their babies. Beaver families defend and nurture dependent offspring. Although their mother's milk is only imperative for the first few weeks of life, kits are still dependent for at least their initial year on older siblings and parents. These aunts and uncles prevent them from swimming in water they consider to be hazardous and if they roam too far, carry them struggling, clasped in their front paws, back to their lodges. They cuddle

them, groom them, whisper comfort in their soft, downy ears, curl up with them daily and essentially through the first winter warm them in their great snuggled huddle of a communal nest. They make beds for them, gather food for them, protect them from predators, afford a caring home, tolerate their tantrums.

When beaver kits die, as they sometimes do, there is even evidence that their mothers will on occasion try to bury their tiny cadavers if they can. We have no knowledge as to why they perform this behaviour, but recent footage from Switzerland demonstrates that they undertake this task with extreme care.[5] While it may not be prompted by 'love', it is a sentient act that is moving in the extreme.

If you're a 'Beaver Nut' and realise earnestly just how critical these creatures are to the future well-being of the earth, with a pivotal role in the creation of abundant biodiversity, water provision, purification, flood and drought alleviation, you will pursue beaver advocacy with the kind of tedious zeal generally restricted to deluded members of obscure religious cults. But no matter how obviously clear it is to you, understand that it is not that obvious to most other people. While your loved ones, parents, wider families and understanding friends may have to tolerate your views, many other people with lives filled with more absorbing interests such as stamp collecting or making tiny bedside lamps out of seashells will not. People have been killing beavers for so long now it's considered by most to be completely normal, commonplace and commercially appropriate.

It's no mystery why we killed beavers in the past; we know exactly why. Their value was considerable. Our insatiable lust for their glands, furs and meat drove their demonic destruction. Once native from Britain in the west to China in the east, from the upper rim of the Mediterranean in the south to the edge of the Arctic Circle in the north, beavers were hunted. Unremittingly. Without remorse. By the time of the Romans, their range was fractured. While some central European powers tried hard to protect their populations – for their commercial worth – by appointing court officials called *Beverari* to administer all matters pertinent to the beaver, most did nothing.[6] Their pyre of destruction burnt white-hot.

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There are many folktales about beavers. It was once believed quite widely that when pursued a hunted beaver would castrate itself with its teeth to 'ransom his body by sacrifice of a part, he throws away that, which by natural instinct he knows to be the object sought for. . . . And if by chance the dogs should chase an animal which has been previously castrated, he has the sagacity to run to an elevated spot, and there lifting up his leg, shews the hunter that the object of his pursuit is gone.'[7]

Unfortunately for believers of this legend the substance sought by hunters, castoreum, is not derived from a beaver's testes but rather from its scent glands, which are located – one on either side – in the internal lining of

their cloaca. Castoreum can contain a high concentration of salicylic acid, the main ingredient in aspirin, which is derived from willow bark. If the beavers concerned have been feeding quite commonly on this shrub, castoreum works well. If they have not, then it is less effective. Although the ancients did not understand this, they did know that castoreum's properties were variable, and may at least in part have attributed any variability to human forgery. The latin name for beaver, *castor*, is derived from the Greek *kastor*. Kastor was one of the divine twins (with Pollux being the other) who were worshiped by women in ancient times as a healer and preserver from disease.

While qastoriun, qasturiun qastur, quastura or more exceptionally 'jundubadastur' – drawn from the Persian *gond* for testicle and *badastar* for beaver – was recognised in the early Middle Ages for its medicinal utility, the farther away from real beavers the dried product was traded, the more confusion surrounded its origins.[8] While the Sephardic Jewish philosopher Moses ben Maimon (or Maimonides, 1138–1204) is believed to have seen a live beaver, Dawud al-Antaki (or David of Antioch, 1543–1599), a Syrian Christian physician, who described the beaver as 'a small, wild animal covered with black hair used for medicinal applications such as headaches and earaches, to treat diseases of the liver and spleen, leprosy and pus in the eyes', could not have done so as he was blind.[9]

The zoologist Al-Damiri (1341–1405) described his jundabadastur as having 'no forepaws, but he has hindlegs

and a long tail. His head is like a human head. . . . He crawls on his chest. . . . ' While this outlandish feature mix of seals and otters was of course fantastical, Al-Damiri was exact in his description of the glands: 'He has four testicles; two outer/apparent ones and two inner/hidden ones. . . . Inside his testicle there is something like blood or honey.'[10] These after all were the important parts. The aspect of human interest. The bits that people paid for.

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The castoreum trade, like that of any other valuable commodity, was international, and when combined with the desire for fur was the principal driver of the beaver's old-world destruction. In North-Central Greece, for example, the city of Kastoria ('place of beavers') was once famous for processing their pelts. Here the craft of fur preparation was developed to a virtual art form in Byzantine times under the sanctified icon of its protector, the prophet Elijah.[11] In the Greek language the name of the Kastorian Fur Association translates as 'O Prophetes Elias' after this luminary. While beavers are extinct in modern Greece and none live anywhere near Kastoria anymore, 'baby' beaver furs are still available for sale at the International Fur Fair, which is held annually in May, where they are modelled by thin, blonde, Russian women with darkened eyes and wide-winged brows. You can take your pick from a wide range of lurid colours and designs. In Britain, the change in the public perception of

fur from a necessity to a luxury marked the beginning of the historic fur trade. In medieval times furs were considered so valuable that their use was strictly controlled by a series of 'sumptuary' laws enacted between 1300 and 1600. The London Skinners' Charter of 1438 brought in legislation to control the size of furs to be used, where and how they could be worn, and which types of fur might be used for edging and lining garments. For example, only high-ranking clergymen were allowed to wear any furs, including sable, beaver, marten and genet, with ermine being reserved for the nobility. While the middle classes were restricted to wearing furs of a lesser value, commoners were allowed only garments made from lambskins, conies or cats.[12]

During the reign of Henry II (1154–89), the workers in the fur and leather trade who were skilled in dressing skins and making articles from them were described as 'pelliparii' or 'peleters'. They formed the first Skinners' Guild for the wealthier merchants who bought stocks of raw skins, to dress them and to create products that could then be sold in their own shops. These aggregations of activities were often located in a particular area of a city such as Skinners' Row in modern Lincoln.[13] Like the beavers, the Skinners had their own saintly patrons such as St Petroc, whose stained-glass face presided over their works. Is it worth wondering if he ever met Felix? Would they have known the same beaver?

By the late Middle Ages, supplies of Eurasian beaver furs were becoming increasingly sparse and the only

source remaining in seemingly inexhaustible abundance was in North America.

While the First Peoples of what are now Canada and the United States had always killed beavers when they wanted their meat, fur or body parts for a specific reason, they at no time sought to exterminate them as a resource. Commonly their hunters revered them more than any other animal and would hang their often-purposeless forelegs, after decorating them, in a tree to prevent their consumption by scavengers.[14]

The white colonists were different. Fur was money. A literal currency where 'made' pelts were interchangeable for goods from the buyers at the trading posts. They were bound in bales for transport to the auction houses of the east before beginning their journey to processing centres worldwide. The soft underfur or 'beaver wool' was the desirable part and its separation required ingenuity in a time before mechanisation provided its own complex commercial solutions. First Nations women were paid a pittance to sit outside the forts of the fur companies with the pelts layered over their laps to pluck out the guard hairs. Others were encouraged to make loose fitting garments with the skin-side out, which they wore over winter to allow the friction of their bodies to remove the stubborn material. Although greasy, rank and verminous, these plucked pelts were worth way more than the original pelts.[15]

The underfur was felted and made into hats in specialised manufacturing centres. Some, such as Denton near

Manchester, retain the image of a beaver on their town's coat of arms in a tribute to the good times gone. Beaver hats were durable and waterproof. They were utilised by merchant's guilds, the navy and the army. Everybody who was anybody wore a beaver felt hat.

They were the favourite hats of Charles I. In 1638, he incorporated the guild of 'bever-makers' and prohibited the importation of hats, in order to support the domestic felting industry. Prudently, John Bradshaw (1602–59), the judge who presided over the king's trial and execution, wore a 'broad brimmed, bullet proof beaver hat, which he had covered over with velvet and lined . . . with steel.' He also wore armour under his robes.[16]

Companies such as the Hudson's Bay Company, the North West Company or John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company competed for supreme control of this lucrative market. They were ruthless. When one felt threatened by the predatory intents of competitors in territories they considered their own, they would urge their trappers to overtrap. To abandon any febrile pretense of sustainability and literally, practically, kill every furbearing creature with the specific intent of creating a 'fur desert'. Once this aim was achieved and their warehouses were full to overflowing, they were faced with the inevitable dilemma of what to do with their haul. If released in totem it could depress the markets unsatisfactorily and therefore their solution was both simple and obvious – to burn them.[17]

The pain. The misery. The fear. The destruction and death this caused bothered them not at all.

When the fur played out, the trappers went, too. Debased and abandoned.

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In addition to being hunted and trapped for castoreum and fur, beavers were also eaten because the Roman Church declared they were fish. The medieval historian Gerald of Wales stated 'that great and religious persons, in times of fasting, eat the tails of this fish-like animal, as having both the taste and colour of fish.'[18] Centuries later, English clergyman and author Edward Topsell recorded in *The History of the Four-Footed Beasts and Serpents* that beaver 'tails have weighed four pound weight, and they are accounted a very delicate dish, for being dressed they eat like barbles'. He goes on to describe that 'the manner of their dressing is, first roasting, and afterward seething in a open pot, that so the evill vapor may go away, and some pottage made with saffron, other with ginger, and many with brine; it is certain that the tail and forefeet taste very sweet'.[19] By the late seventeenth century it was no longer just the tail that was allowed on fast days but the whole beaver itself. When the Bishop of Quebec asked his superiors whether his parish could eat beavers on Fridays during Lent, the church declared that indeed they could for the 'beaver was a fish due to the fact that it was an excellent swimmer'.[20] And so the killing continued.

While Topsell did repeat ancient and fantastic legends in his writing, his account of the biology of beavers is

accurate in parts. He describes in familiar fashion how they are not much bigger than a 'Countrey dog, their head short, their ears very small and round, their teeth very long,' how they used the same paths to and fro from the water, how they ate 'the bitter rindes of trees, which are unto them the most delicate, especially the Aldren, Poplar and Willow.' He also provided insight into how beavers were hunted, recording that '[beavers] are taken for their skins, tails and cods . . . when their calves (caves) are found there is made a great hole or breach therein, where into is put a little dog, which the beast espying, flyeth to the end of her den, and there defendeth herself by her teeth, till all her structure or building be rased, and she laid open to her enemies, who with such instruments as they have preset, beat her to death'. and that 'They cannot dive long time underwater but must put up their heads for breath, which being espied by them that beset them, they kill them with gunshot, or pierce them with Otters spears.'[21]

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Despite the carnage, it is clear now that even in modern Britain we have never lived in an entirely beaver-free landscape. Long after they ceased to exist as living beings, their submerged skulls and wood workings continued to surface and surprise from the mirk of the old fen mires. An assembly of their skins, stitched together with their outsides turned in, cradled and caressed the delicate

intricacy of the lyre in the Anglo-Saxon grave good assembly of the king buried in his ship at Sutton Hoo.[22]

Sometimes the landscape remembers.

Recently, as I sat in a municipal office to consider yet another fenced beaver trial in the north of England, a site manager showed us a remarkable image. His aerial slide unwittingly displayed a beaver-generated landscape – a wet valley swamp on a stream called the Barbrook. *Bar* is derived from old Saxon for beaver, and although its beavers are now long gone, their past existence remains etched in an intricacy of the patterns left by the water's wanderings as it slewed and shifted a millennia ago in an ineffectual effort to bypass their dams. The multiplicity of bell-shaped structures on the meandering stream system that developed and is retained in the modern, now sheep-shorn bare landscape is the legacy of their works.

According to the site manager, these structures still fill rapidly and completely with water when the brook is in spate, meaning beaver dams fulfill their natural, flow-slowing function long, long after the death of their creators.

Revelatory images are seldom this stark. Our ploughing, or infilling, or drainage in the open land has generally destroyed them quite utterly. Where they remain, as the flat silt plains that once coagulated behind their dams with perhaps a fresh stream cutting through in forests, the trees softly mantle their memory.

But although visions of the sort seen at Barbook are rare, sometimes, other surprises occur. In 1837, a nearly

complete skeleton of a beaver was found in a hole in the bank of the river Stour near Keyneston Mill in Dorset. The discovering archaeologist recorded that 'the hole in which the bones lay did not appear to have any communication with the surface above. . . . Slight as is this evidence, I am inclined to think that the animal entered its home underwater.' He was quite correct. Beavers, when they have no need to create their famous stick-nest lodges, will simply excavate a burrow system in the friable soils of a riverbank from either at or immediately under the water level via a tunnel upwards into a series of snug, dry living chambers at the top. Although they may still be occasionally exposed by erosion in British riverbanks, these features must be becoming rarer. If no direct beaver evidence remains, their emptiness is equivocal and this Dorset discovery remains the only example to date of any definite physical association with its creator.

Beaver dams, lodges, distinctively gnawed sticks or trees, bone fragments and their great orange incisor teeth set in amulets have, however, been unearthed from many other locations. It is inevitable that as more archaeologists become aware of the former abundance of beavers in Britain, and as a result more familiar with their field signs, that other evidence of existence will appear. Perhaps one day their presence will be confirmed in the extensive lake-lands of Ireland where to date there is no proof of them ever existing. The wealth of material we now have and our understanding of beaver ecology

elsewhere renders inconceivable the prospect that they were not at one time present in all our watercourses, slowing flows, filtering silts and building soils. Readying the land for us. To use. To farm.

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The past importance and prevalence of beavers on Britain's landscapes is also evident in our place names. From Manchester to Ashford, from Leith to London, beaver place names abound. These houses, roads, streets, closes and primary schools are the last legacy of their great exploitation.

Sometimes the memory is idiosyncratic. The Beaver Inn in Appledore on the North Devon Coast has been in existence for at least 400 years, and contains beaver memorabilia everywhere; while it has no obvious modern connection with beavers, an endearingly realistic clay effigy looks down on customers from the roof ridge high above. It's a lovely, lively local pub, warm and inviting in its wide bay windows when the winds from the Atlantic blow the stinging spray east. They do good food and folk music.

In the remote western part of Scotland, a tradition was recorded amongst the highlanders in the 1770s of the *Losleathan* (los-loy-dan), or broad-tailed otter, being once abundant in the region of Lochaber.[23] Two entries in the 1848–52 ordnance survey – *Coire Tolldobhrain* ('the Hollow of the Beavershole') and *Alllt*

*Coire Toll-dobhrain* ('burn of the hollow of the Beavers hole') – may also recall their memory. *Dobhran* means 'dweller in a wet place' in modern Gaelic, and these place names are not recorded in more modern maps.[24] Their original meaning was derived from the Ordnance Survey officers' verification of enquiries of local individuals of prominence such as clergymen, farmers, doctors and other prominent citizens. These names were specifically recalled by Alexander McBeath of Shieldaig and the Rev. K. Macdonald of Applecross.[25] In more modern times it has been suggested that they were misrecorded and referred to common otters instead. There is no reason to consider this modern interpretation correct, and other evidence from elsewhere demonstrates that when beavers become uncommon a similar confusion arises. It is likely that the memories of the old people who spoke first are most likely to be true.

There is a *Beverkae* place name in Fife, and although no other place names record the presence of beavers in Scotland, there are trade and oral records. Hector Boece for example, who was the first principal of Aberdeen University, writing in his *Scotorum Historiae* of 1526 recorded beavers as being one of a wider range of species to be found in the region of Lochness. In his time they were present in such numbers that their furs could support a trade with German merchants.[26]

In Wales the beaver was called the *afangc*, and many place names associated with this word still exist. In the North Welsh valley of Nant Ffrancon ('Vale of the

Beaver'), one particular location is named the *sarn yr afangc* ('the beavers' dam').[27]

Gerald of Wales (1146–1223), also known as Cambrensis, was of mixed Norman and Welsh descent. In addition to being a historian, he was an archdeacon of Brecon and a royal clerk, travelling and writing widely on many subjects. In or around 1170, he was wandering around Britain with the then Archbishop of Canterbury trying to drum up at least some enthusiasm for another crusade when he encountered beavers. His description of the landscape they occupied is illuminating. 'The Church dedicated to St. Ludoc, mill, bridge, salmon leap, an orchard with a delightful garden, all stand together on a small plot of ground. The Teivi has another peculiarity, being the only river in Wales, or even in England, which has beavers, in Scotland they are said to be found in one river, but are very scarce.'[28]

It is quite clear that he was describing no wilderness.

As he went on to recount 'the manner in which they bring their materials to the water, and with what skill they connect them in the construction of their dwellings in the midst of rivers', it's obvious to wonder if the people who harvested the salmon sustainably were also trying to do so with the beavers.[29] Why else would they remain on the Teivi when they were increasingly absent elsewhere?

The many English place names and their derivatives from the fifth century onwards – *bar*, *bjorr*, *beofer*, *beuerlic*, *beuer*, *befer*, *bewer* – mask others that are not so obvious. On north Exmoor both a *bibers* and *bibors*

hill were identified in the first series of Ordnance Survey maps, from 1805–68. Together with upper and lower Beverton and Beverton pool, all are located on tributaries of the main river Exe. Although both no longer exist, they may indicate the presence of beavers in times not so long lost. If *Beaverdyke* in North Yorkshire describes well the muddy impoundments they create from plant roots and vegetation when trees are scarce, *Beaverhole* must recall their burrows and *Beverbrook* their streams. Other recollections summon memory of wider ghost-lands. While *Bevercotes* in Nottinghamshire refers directly to the place where the beavers build their 'cotes or dewllings', could it be that Beverton on Exmoor reflects a first human impression from high, wooded valleys where medieval hunters looking down at the 'townships' made by the beavers below saw reflected in their semi-order an effigy of their own ramshackle abodes?[30]

Perhaps Beverston in Gloucestershire is a long-lost trading centre in the dried castor sacs, 'cods' or stones from the beavers that were once so abundant in the vastness of the nearby reed swamps? In sleepy Suffolk the current Little Glemham Mill was once called Beaversham Mill. Was it built on the site of a former dam?[31] Did the old Devon word *wirth*, taken by colonists to Labrador for the cache of sticks that they gathered outside their lodge entrances for winter food, really survive for a millennium without human recollection of their activity in a county where only a single archaeological record exists?[32] Again, we cannot tell but it is more likely than not that direct

individual experience and intimate impression is reflected in at least some of these names. What is for certain is that when the beavers went, much else went with them.

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In the early sixteenth century, the King's Antiquary John Leyland wrote that 'beavers used to abound in the waters of the River Hull.' Beverley on Humberside means beaver meadows or stream.[33] In the flat vastness of its surrounding landscape the rare names of Stork Hill and Stork Dyke provide a tantalising testament to the lost life of the wetlands, which desiccated and dried with the passing of the beaver.[34]

In prehistory male moose would have swayed through swamps where stands of straggling greater tussock sedge, old and close-packed, stood tall enough to turn their antlers.

Shoals of silver fish would have plumed and pulsated in gin-clear lagoons as they raced to avoid predators lurking deep in their depths.

Torpedo-long eel-pout.

Great pike of vast size.

Porpoise and seals well into inland.

Otters in gamboling families.

Bears shambling in season.

Wolves on willowed islets where the water allowed.

Emerald frogs in call cacophony suppressing all spring sound.

In sunlight long snakes wrapped around branches with pond turtles beneath them basking in log-laden clusters.

Bronze burnished large coppers. Swooping swallowtails bejeweled.

Clouds of spinning insects in translucent tornados strobing slowly upwards towards the lazy light.

All subordinated to the birds.

The solemn sentinels of the black storks in the leaf dim gaps on the limbs of the high trees. The fractured yarning of the erne soaring high in the egg-blue thermals. The reeling, piping flocks of whirling waders. The rising multitudes of dabbling ducks. Grunting colonies of ivory spoonbills. Snapping pink pelicans with bucket-billed beaks. Grey flocks of geese in honking formation. Booming bitterns, bugling cranes, chittering finch flocks and sweet singing warblers. The spring bill clattering of the white storks in their tall tree nests, guano splattered and ancient would have together combined the melody of lost life-lands anthem.

But for a long time, beavers still lingered.

When in 1577 William Harrison the Canon of Windsor wrote in his Elizabethan description of mammalian vermin that 'I might here intreat largelie of other vermine . . . and likewise of the beuer', he presented an account of the beaver he knew with stunning lucidity: 'Certes the taile of this beast is like vnto a thin whetstone, as the bodie vnto a monsterous rat: the beast also it selfe is of such force in the teeth, that it will gnaw a hole through a thicke planke, or shere through a dubble billet in a night'.[35]

I have in my time moved, trapped and handled many beavers. For those of us who work with them and know their abilities well, Harrison's description – echoing back through 400 years of time – is eerily, evocatively, exact. It is unlikely that this was a secondhand account as the impression of their power he described is vivid. Unforgettable. His story is not repeated elsewhere and it is not irrational to assume that whatever he witnessed he never forgot.

Harrison went on to state that their 'said tailes are a delicate dish, and their stones of such medicinable force, that . . . foure men smelling vnto them each after did bleed at the nose through their attractive force. . . . There is greatest plentie of them in Persia, cheefelie about Balascham, from whence they and their dried cods are brought into all quarters of the world, though not without some forgerie by such as provide them.'

In 1566, the 'Acte for the preservation of Grayne' saw a system of bounty payments made by parish constables for the heads of specific wild animals and birds considered, as Harrison referenced, to be vermin. These records, which afford a horrific account of loss, also provide evidence that beavers survived in small numbers in some parts of Britain into near-modern times. At Bolton Percy, near York, a church warden's account of 1789 records the sum of twopence being paid to a John Swail for a 'bever head'.[36] On the following page an entry records a shilling being paid to another recipient for an otter. Bolton Percy is connected by the Rivers Wharf and

Washburn to sites near Harrogate where the place names *Beaver Hole* and *Beaver Dyke* remain. In 1904, another author, Edgar Bogg, recorded that he had been told by an elderly man that his grandfather recalled beavers living in a location called Oak Beck in his youth. Bogg dated this time to around 1750, which would have been well within the time range of the slightly later record from Bolton Percy.[37]

Intriguingly, while Bogg goes on to state that 'scientific authorities on the British fauna say that the reward (two or threepence) down to late times paid by wood-reeves and constables for each bever-head (as the parish records for many northern places spelt it) was properly for the flat-nosed otter', the parish clerk at Bolton Percy quite clearly knew the difference and paid accordingly.[38] Otters were worth more so why would you accept tuppence for an animal that was worth a shilling? The wood-reeves were forest administrators, not gamekeepers. Their remit was to protect forest income and as a result it is also much more likely at a time when 'withy' was a valuable commodity that 'bevers' would have concerned them. Otters as pescatarians would have troubled them not at all.

After this time there are no more records of beaver in Britain. While it cannot be considered that the above, however grainy, reflects the absolute end of the beaver, by the early 1800s the works of the great Dutch drainers such as Cornelius Vermuyden (1595–1677) were more than a century old, and the canalisation and drainage of the smaller wetlands was also well underway. When the

romantic poet John Clare (1793–1864) recorded that 'they hung the moles for traitors – though the brook is running still it runs a naked brook, cold and chill', it is highly unlikely that, outside what scrub remained on the big river systems, much sanctuary of worth would have remained for beavers.[39] By then the dominion of humans was near-absolute, and the large mammals that survived such as the red fox or deer only did so at the behest of those who insisted they remain for the chase.

Where and when the last beaver died, we will never know. Perhaps sad and alone. The last of its lost colony without care or company. With limbs stiff from old wounds. No warmth from its fellows, no honied aromas or last soft murmurs as its heart slowly stilled.

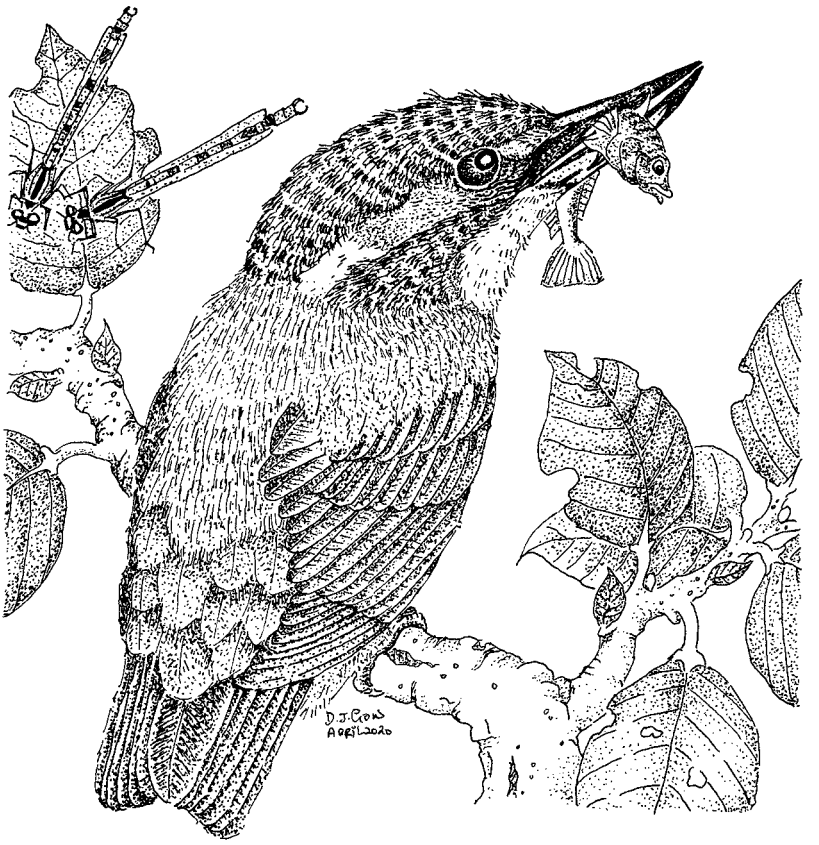
Or perhaps brutal and sudden. Voices, shouting, the burrow roof giving way, cold air rushing in and with it the hot rank smell of its pursuers snarling, snapping curs.

Saliva and sweat. Swearing.

Raining, crushing blows. Numb paralysis.

Blood and darkness.

A terror-filled death.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