

CHAPTER 2

Flying off Towers: Eilmer of Malmesbury

“Just think happy thoughts and you’ll fly.”

— *Peter Pan*, by J. M. Barrie

“Sometimes flying feels too God-like to be attained by man. Sometimes, the world from above seems too beautiful, too wonderful, too distant for human eyes to see.”

— Charles A. Lindberg

Opposite: Trumpeter swan. Courtesy: JFH.

Flying off Towers: Eilmer of Malmesbury

Throughout history, there have been attempts by individuals to jump off towers in their efforts to fly like a bird.

Eilmer the flying monk

Malmesbury Abbey in Wiltshire, England is where the flight of a monk took place around 1005 ACE. We might imagine **Brother Eilmer** settling down to breakfast one Sunday munching home-made monastic bread smothered in delicious marmalade, all the while laying his plans to take to the air.

We know from early writings¹ that Eilmer made wings so he could fly off the monastery roof. We might think of him in the carpentry shop one day working on some fine wooden platters for the community's hearty salads and desserts when he had a brilliant inspiration: "I wonder what it would be like to say a proper 'Hello' to God, rather than all this praying and meditation on earth in the chapel? Maybe I should just pop by?" He may have scratched his bald head as the image of wings came to mind. After all, he had certainly read about Icarus.

"That's it! Wings to fly to heaven and say the Big Hello." He would have put his regular carpentry aside and started looking around for some pieces of wood to create the skeleton and basic structure for two large wings, which is in fact what he did, according to the historical record.

¹ Evidence of Eilmer's flight is described in writings by the eminent mediaeval historian William of Malmesbury, who was a monk at Malmesbury Abbey a few years later.





Malmesbury Abbey, 2021.
Courtesy: AM.

Again, let's imagine that he found some ash boughs on his workbench and then went outside looking for willow branches on the monastery property (both types of wood can be found there locally today). For Eilmer, willow would have been useful in construction because it would be pliant for shaping and contours.

He probably would have shared his idea with his brother monks, and we can be confident that they would have thought he was either mad, or brilliant or both. They, along with a crowd of curious locals, would have provided the audience to cheer him on his way and encourage this flying project. The Abbey certainly would have had parchment lying around for the monks' scriptural writing projects, as well as cloth material for covering the altar and making vestments. Eilmer obviously suspected that parchment, silk and linen would make his wings as strong and light as possible. Perhaps when he was finished and trying on his wings, the other monks may have said he looked a bit like an angel? And perhaps, they said he would meet his God and Maker sooner than planned.

The launch most likely took place from the Abbey roof: closer to God, and furthest from the ground? Perhaps it took place on Sunday, after morning prayers when everyone's good wishes would be especially holy? In full view of the gathered monks, a brother monk would have counted down, "Three, Two, One..."

Eilmer at this historic moment would have stepped bravely off, into the wind from the edge of the Abbey tower roof. With his head turned upward to heaven, he would have flapped his wings strongly. Everyone would have cheered and clapped loudly, but it would only have taken a few flaps before everyone realized that heaven would not be the first stop. Eilmer would have flown, perhaps even glided a few feet, but then quickly started his descent. He probably just missed the monastery's apple trees and the King's Wall, which is marked on the map today and is where the first king of England is buried.²

He likely crash-landed close to the River Avon, fortunately missing the cold water—we don't know if he could swim.

The monks would have rushed to the landing spot, where they would have found their holy brother tangled up in his flying gear. Eilmer couldn't walk, so would have been carried back to the Abbey, where they pronounced that he had broken his legs from the flight. The monks would have been grateful that he had not lost his life, and probably prayed a big "Thank You" to God that the life of their brother had been spared. And they probably all recognized that Heaven was not a particularly easy place to fly to...at least not just yet.

²The first king of England was Athelstan, grandson of King Alfred.



Monk in Flight.

Malmesbury.

Artist: T. S. La Fontaine, 2004.

Courtesy: AM.



Pub sign: Flying Monk.
Malmesbury, 1961-1980.
Courtesy: AM.



Mute swan. Do the local swans still make gestures that may recall the *Shock and Awe* of their ancestors on seeing that Flying Monk? Courtesy: JFH.

The manuscript tells us that Eilmer lived until a ripe old age. We might suspect he told this cautionary tale to other young novice monks who may have dreamed of creating their own shortcut to heaven. Should you visit Malmesbury in Wiltshire

today you can see the Abbey, its beautiful landscape and the river. There is a stained-glass window at the Abbey that celebrates the flying monk, and there was once a pub, whose sign celebrated this early attempt to fly.



NEXT

It wasn't till some 400 years later that we learn of another remarkable person who, as a scientist, observer and artist, was inspired by bird flight.