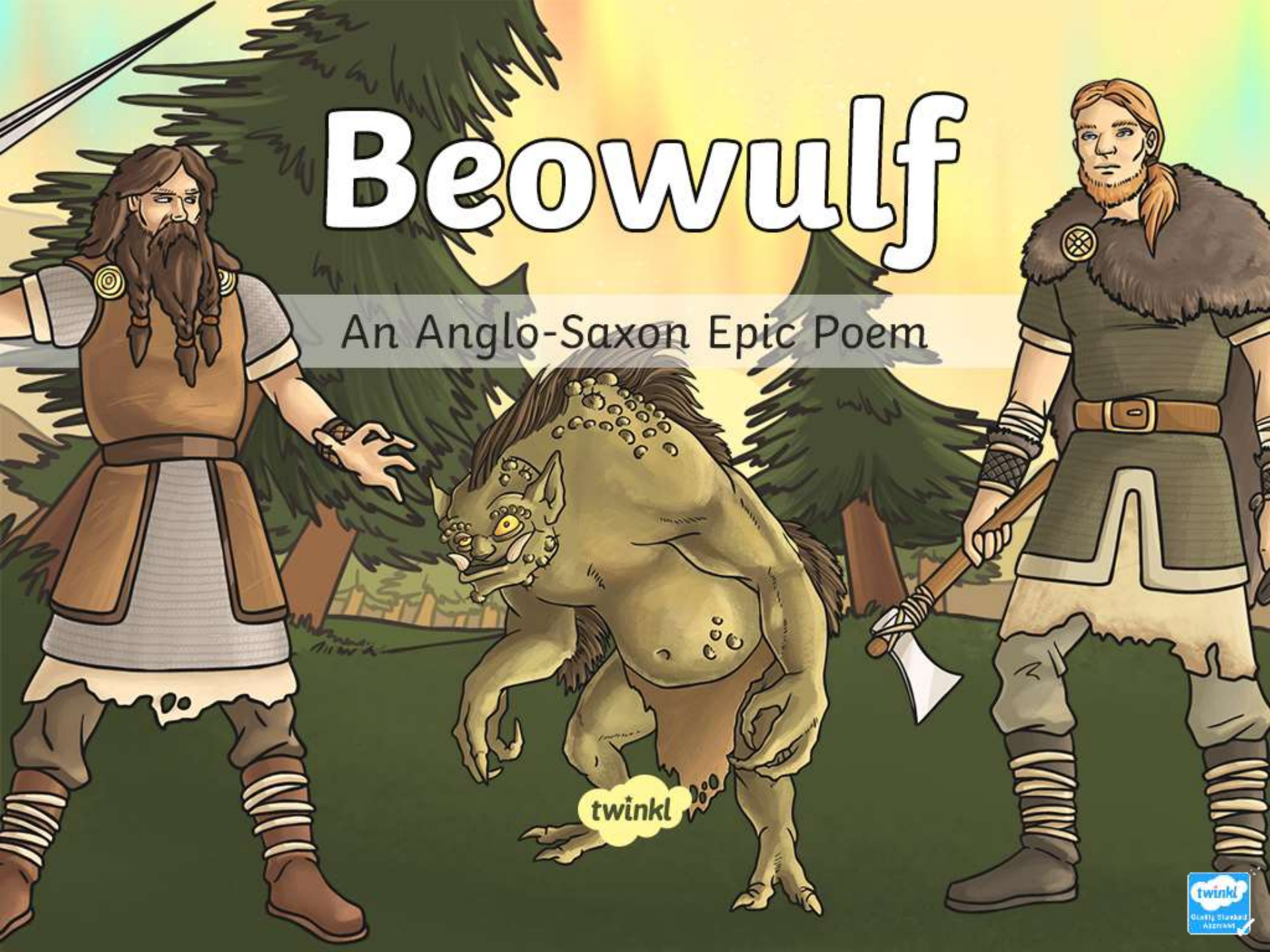


Beowulf

An Anglo-Saxon Epic Poem



Aim

- To learn the story of Beowulf.
- To learn about Britain at time the story was told.

Success Criteria

- I can retell the main events in Beowulf.
- I can explain what a legend is.
- I can explain what an epic poem is.
- I know two facts about Britain at the time of Beowulf.

An Epic Poem

Beowulf is a famous epic poem.

'Epic' means a very long poem about heroes and warriors.



Beowulf is one of the first recorded stories we have in Britain and it was written in Old English.

Beowulf is the hero of a Scandinavian tribe, the Geats, and the poem tells of his battle with a monster called Grendel.

Other famous epic poems are The Song of Hiawatha, Gilgamesh and the Iliad.



Beowulf

The story of Beowulf, first told around 800AD, tells of events around 200 years before that. It wasn't written down back then. Instead, the story was passed down orally by storytellers.

There is one surviving manuscript in the British Museum. Experts believe it is around 1000 years old!

Old English, the language spoken by the Anglo-Saxons, was very different to the English we speak today.

Listen to the start of Beowulf in Old English!
Can you understand any of it?



Have a look at Beowulf written down. Can you understand any of it?



Characters and Places

Beowulf (<i>bay-oh-wolf</i>)	the hero of the story from Geatland
Hrothgar (<i>hroth-gar</i>)	the King of Denmark
Grendel (<i>gren-dell</i>)	a monster believed to be a descendent of Cain
Grendel's Mother	a hag who lives in a swamp
Wiglaf (<i>wee-lahf</i>)	a young kinsman of Beowulf
Denmark (<i>den-mark</i>)	where the Danes lived
Geatland (<i>gaey-aht-land</i>)	where the Geats lived
Heorot (<i>hay-oh-roht</i>)	Hrothgar's hall

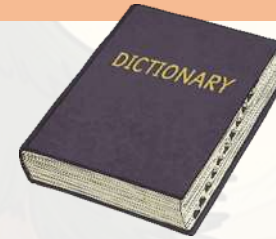


Hrothgar Builds Heorot

The story began when the King of the Danes, Hrothgar, built a mead-hall. He called the hall, Heorot, meaning hart.



Use dictionaries and the Internet to find a modern English word which means 'hart'.



Why do you think Hrothgar called the mead-hall Heorot? What does the word symbolise?



Grendel Attacks

Once Heorot was built, King Hrothgar and his people enjoyed feasts and celebrations there. The hall was filled with the sounds, sights and smells of happy gatherings.

Grendel, a monster who lived nearby, despised the noise from the celebrations. One night, he decided to attack the hall, killing and devouring thirty of Hrothgar's warriors.



What does the word 'devouring' make you think about Grendel?

Why do you think Grendel 'despised' the noise from the celebrations?

Heorot Lies Silent

After Grendel's attack, King Hrothgar and the Danes were terrified of Grendel. The celebrations and feasts at Heorot came to an end.

The Danes lived in fear of Grendel for over twelve years! During that time, the people abandoned Heorot and lived quietly in their homes.



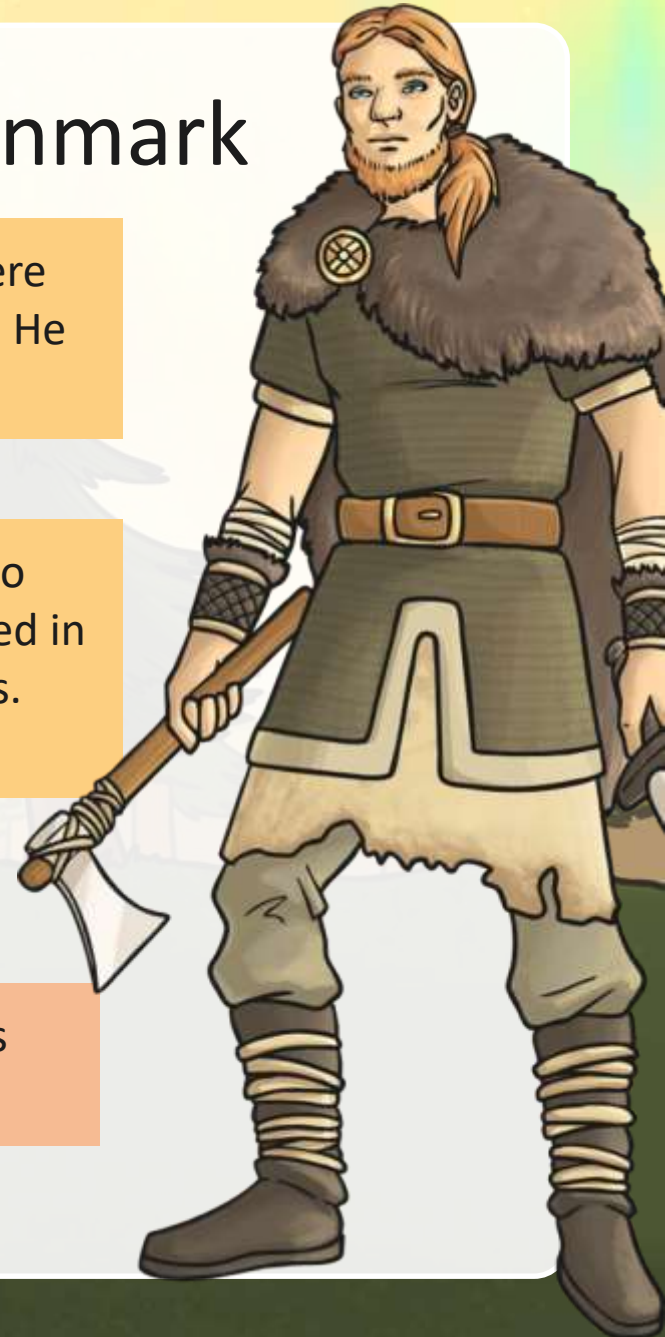
Heorot lay empty for twelve years. What does this tell you about what Hrothgar's people felt about Grendel?

Beowulf Travels to Denmark

Eventually, news travelled over the water to the Geats where the young warrior Beowulf heard of King Hrothgar's plight. He sailed to Denmark to offer help.

King Hrothgar was grateful for Beowulf's help and agreed to hold another feast in Heorot. After the feast, Beowulf stayed in the great hall while all the Danes went back to their homes.

Why did it take so long for Beowulf to hear of Grendel's attack? How would the news have travelled?



Beowulf's First Battle

Grendel was furious about the feast and attacked Heorot! Beowulf, pretending to be asleep, leapt up and fought Grendel. His men drew their swords but Grendel's skin was so tough that they could not pierce it.

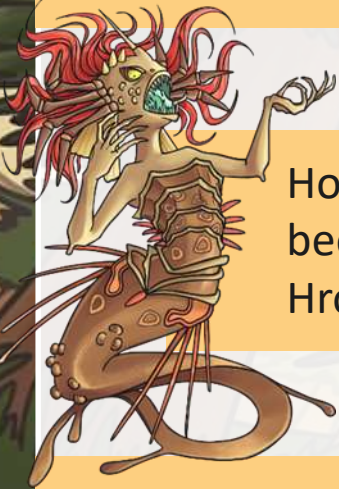
After a long battle, Beowulf, using no weapons, finally managed to defeat Grendel by tearing off his arm! Grendel fled to his home in the marshes and died.

Why did Beowulf insist on fighting Grendel without any weapons? What did this prove about him?



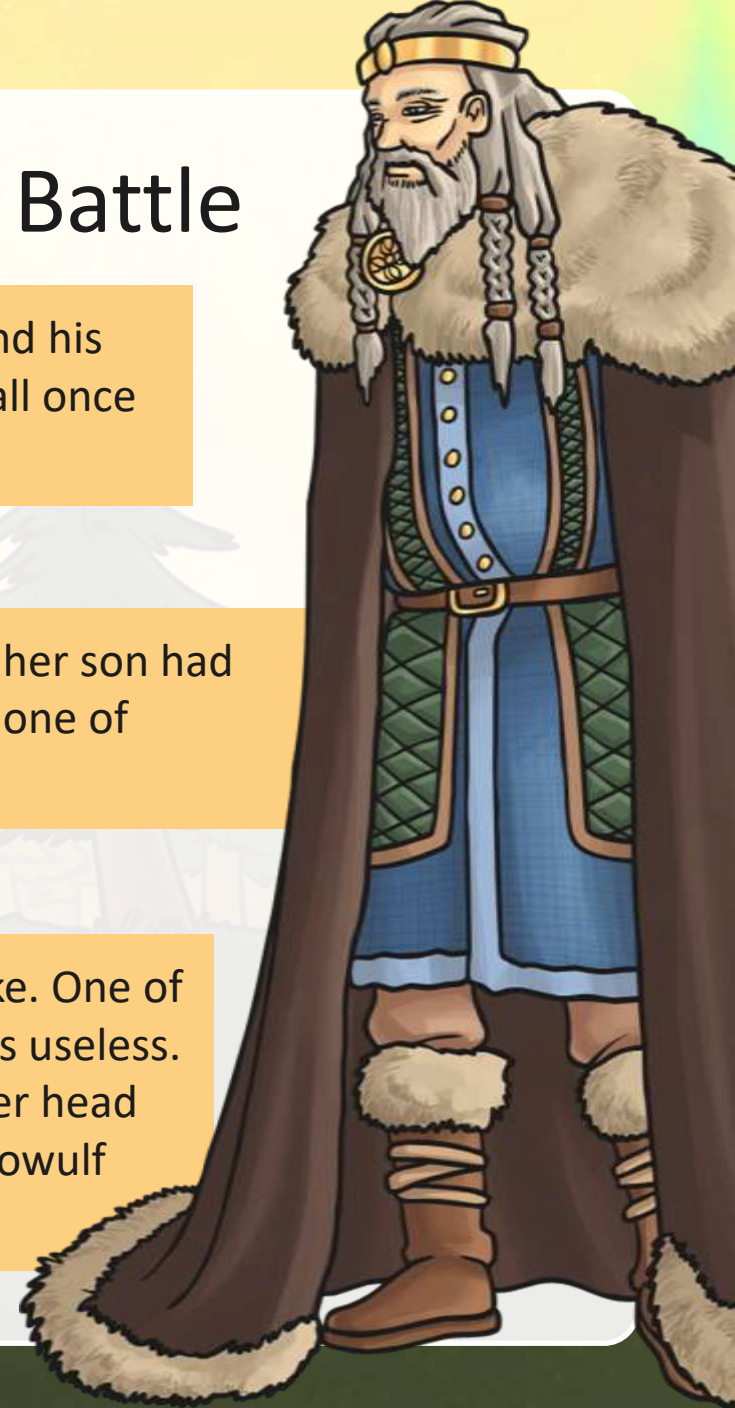
Beowulf's Second Battle

After hearing that Grendel had been killed, Hrothgar and his thanes returned to Heorot. They ate and slept in the hall once again, finally feeling safe.



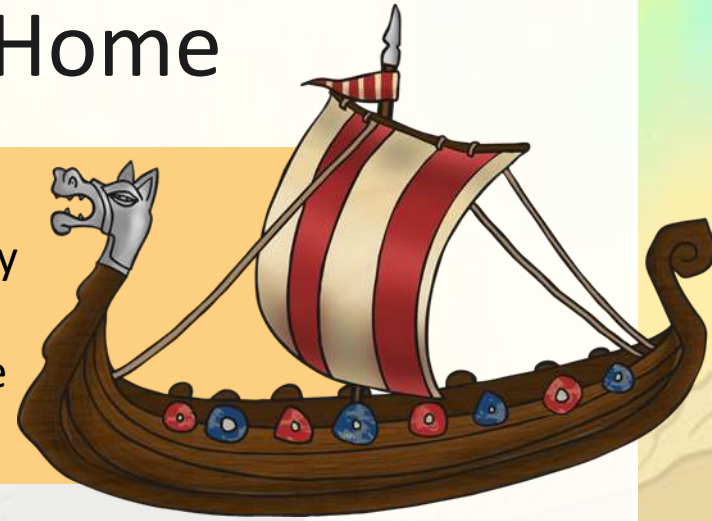
However, Grendel's mother was angry that her son had been killed and attacked Heorot. She killed one of Hrothgar's best warriors before escaping.

Beowulf and his men tracked her to her lair below a lake. One of his men gave him his sword to fight her but when it was useless. Instead, he took her own sword from her and cut off her head with it. Her poisonous blood dissolved the weapon! Beowulf returned to Heorot triumphant!



Beowulf Returns Home

Hrothgar was overjoyed when Beowulf returned to Heorot. He declared Beowulf a hero and gave him many gifts including his family's heirloom sword. He thanked Beowulf for his help and told him they would always be friends.



Before he returned to Geatland, Hrothgar warned Beowulf about the dangers of pride and fame...

Why do you think King Hrothgar gave Beowulf a warning? What does this suggest might happen at the end of the story?

Beowulf King of the Geats

Many years later, Beowulf became the King of his people, the Geats. He reigned for a long time and was well liked by his people because he was a good king.

Fifty years after Beowulf killed Grendel's mother, one of King Beowulf's servants stole a golden cup from a dragon's lair.

The dragon was furious and left its cave, burning everything in its path.



Beowulf's Third Battle

Beowulf told his warriors that he would fight the dragon alone and they were to wait for him. By now an old man, Beowulf quickly found himself outmatched and overpowered by the dragon.

Frightened, all but one of his warriors ran to hide in the forest nearby. The one who remained was named Wiglaf and he came to Beowulf's aid. They defeated the dragon together but not before Beowulf was fatally wounded.

Explain how King Hrothgar's warning relates to Beowulf's defeat by the dragon.



Beowulf's Funeral

The Geats burned Beowulf on a huge funeral pyre and he was greatly mourned. His people didn't know who would protect them with Beowulf gone.

To honour their great king, they built a barrow, which could be seen from the sea, in his memory. He was buried with the gold and treasures given to him by Hrothgar.



What was a barrow? Some famous barrows are found at Sutton Hoo. Use the Internet to find out what these are.



Glossary

Barrow	a small hill or tumulus built over a burial chamber
Epic	very long tale about a legendary hero
Despise	to dislike a lot
Devour	to eat something quickly and eagerly
Funeral pyre	a pile of wood for burning the bodies of the dead
Heirloom	an object passed down through the generations of a family
Lair	an underground hiding place
Manuscript	an old handwritten book
Mead hall	a large hall or palace for Scandinavian tribes



