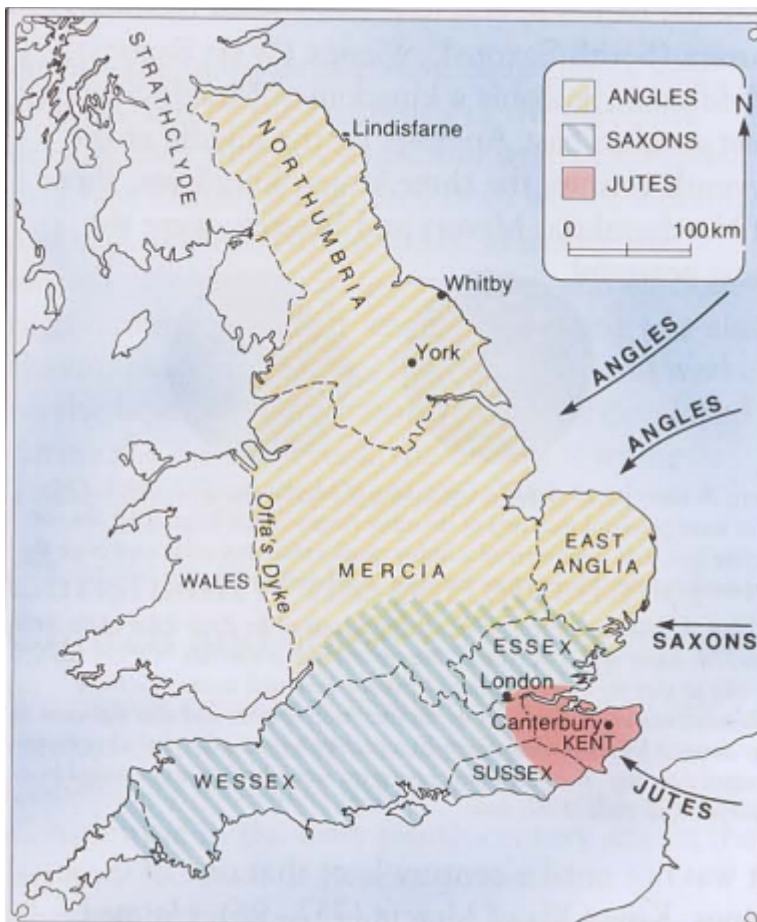




# Anglo-Saxons and Vikings

The wealth of Britain by the fourth century, the result of its mild climate and centuries of peace, was a temptation to the greedy. At first the Germanic tribes only raided Britain, but after AD 430 they began to settle. The newcomers were warlike and illiterate.



The invaders came from three powerful Germanic tribes, the Saxons, Angles and Jutes. The Jutes settled mainly in Kent and along the south coast, and were soon considered no different from the Angles and Saxons. The Angles settled in the east, and also in the north Midlands, while the Saxons settled between the Jutes and the Angles in a band of land from the Thames Estuary westwards. The Anglo-Saxon migrations gave the larger part of Britain its new name, England, “the land of the Angles”.

The British Celts fought the raiders and settlers from Germany as well as they could. The raiders advance was temporarily halted by

an army of Celtic Britons under the command of the legendary King Arthur. However, during the next hundred years they were slowly pushed westwards until by 570 they were forced west of Gloucester. Finally most were driven into the mountains in the far west, which the Saxons called “Weallas”, or “Wales”, meaning “the land of the foreigners”. Some Celts were driven into Cornwall, where they later accepted the rule of Saxon lords. In the north, other Celts were driven into the lowlands of the country which became known as Scotland. Some Celts stayed behind, and many became slaves of the Saxons. Hardly anything is left of Celtic language or culture in England, except for the names of some rivers, Thames, Mersey, Severn and Avon, and two large cities, London and Leeds.



King Arthur provides a wonderful example of the distortions of popular history. In folklore and myth he is a great English hero, and he and his knights of the round table are regarded as the perfect example of medieval nobility and chivalry. In fact, he lived long before medieval times and was a Romanized Celt trying

to hold back the advances of the Anglo-Saxons — the very people who became ‘the English’!

The strength of Anglo-Saxon culture is obvious even today. Days of the week were named after Germanic gods: Tig (Tuesday), Wodin (Wednesday), Thor (Thursday), Frei (Friday). New place-names appeared on the map. The first of these show that the earliest Saxon villages, like the Celtic ones, were family villages. The ending -ing meant folk or family, thus “Reading” is the place of the family of Rada, “Hastings” of the family of Hasta. *Ham* means farm, *ton* means settlement. Birmingham, Nottingham or Southampton, for example, are Saxon place-names. Because the Anglo-Saxon kings often established settlements, Kingston is a frequent place-name.'

The Anglo-Saxons established a number of kingdoms, some of which still exist in county or regional names to this day: Essex (East Saxons), Sussex (South Saxons), Wessex (West Saxons), Middlesex (probably a kingdom of Middle Saxons), East Anglia (East Angles). By

the middle of the seventh century the three largest kingdoms, those of Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex, were the most powerful.



It was not until a century later that one of these kings, King Offa of Mercia (757–96), claimed “kingship of the English”. He had good reason to do so. He was powerful enough to employ thousands of men to build a huge dyke, or earth wall, the length of the Welsh border to keep out the troublesome Celts. But although he

was the most powerful king of his time, he did not control all of England. The power of Mercia did not survive after Offa’s death.

## Government and society

The Saxons created institutions which made the English state strong for the next 500 years. One of these institutions was the King's Council, called the Witan. The Witan probably grew out of informal groups of senior warriors and churchmen to whom kings like Offa had turned for advice or support on difficult matters. By the tenth century the Witan was a formal body, issuing laws and charters. It was not at all democratic, and the king could decide to ignore the Witan's advice. But he knew that it might be dangerous to do so. For the Witan's authority was based on its right to choose kings, and to agree the use of the king's laws. Without its support the king's own authority was in danger.

The Saxons divided the land into new administrative areas, based on shires, or counties. These shires, established by the end of the tenth century, remained almost exactly the same for a thousand years. "Shire" is the Saxon word, "county" the Norman one, but both are still used. (In 1974 the counties were reorganised, but the new system is very like the old one.) Over each shire was appointed a shire reeve, the king's local administrator. In time his name became shortened to "sheriff".

In each district was a "manor" or large house. This was a simple building where local villagers came to pay taxes, where justice was administered, and where men met together to join the Anglo-Saxon army, the fyrd. The lord of the manor had to organise all this, and make sure village land was properly shared. It was the beginning of the manorial system which reached its fullest development under the Normans.

At first the lords, or aldermen, were simply local officials. But by the beginning of the eleventh century they were warlords, and were often called by a new Danish name, earl. Both words, alderman and earl, remain with us today: aldermen are elected officers in local government, and earls are high ranking nobles. It was the beginning of a class system, made up of king, lords, soldiers and workers on the land. One other important class developed during the Saxon period, the men of learning. These came from the Christian Church.

## The Vikings

Towards the end of the eighth century new raiders were tempted by Britain's wealth. These were the Vikings, a word which probably means either "pirates" or "the people of the sea inlets", and they came from Norway and Denmark. Like the Anglo-Saxons they only raided at first. They burnt churches and monasteries along the east, north and west coasts of Britain and Ireland. London was itself raided in 842.

In 865 the Vikings invaded Britain once it was clear that the quarrelling Anglo-Saxon kingdoms could not keep them out. This time they came to conquer and to settle. The

Vikings quickly accepted Christianity and did not disturb the local population. By 875 only King Alfred in the west of Wessex held out against the Vikings, who had already taken most of England. After some serious defeats Alfred won a decisive battle in 878, and eight years later he captured London. He was strong enough to make a treaty with the Vikings.



*The Oseberg Viking ship, made in about AD 800, was 21 metres long and carried about 35 men. Although this particular ship was probably only used along the coast, ships of similar size were used to invade Britain. Their design was brilliant. When an exact copy of similar ship was used to cross the Atlantic to America in 1893, its captain wrote, "the finest merchant ships of our day . . . have practically the same type of bottom as the Viking ships."*

Viking rule was recognised in the east and north of England. It was called the Danelaw, the land where the law of the Danes ruled. In the rest of the country Alfred was recognised as king. During his struggle against the Danes, he had built walled settlements to keep them out. These were called burghs. They became prosperous market towns, and the word, now usually spelt borough, is one of the commonest endings to place names, as well as the name of the unit of municipal or town administration today.

## King Alfred the Great



King of Wessex

849–899

Reign: 871–899

Best known for establishing peace with the Vikings and building the Kingdom of England.

Among his achievements:

- defeated the Vikings in the Battle of Edington in 878, then converted their leader Guthrum to Christianity;
  - recaptured London from the Vikings and established a boundary between the Saxons and the Vikings - the area ruled by the Vikings was known as the Danelaw;
  - strengthened his kingdom's defences by creating a series of fortresses (burhs) and a decent army;
- built ships against Viking sea attacks, so beginning the English navy;
  - had books translated into English and promoted learning;
  - founded monasteries;
  - commissioned the writing of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a historical record of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain.

### Some important dates

410 — Germanic invasions begin (Angles, Saxons, Jutes).

430 — Germanic tribes begin to settle.

the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century — Vikings start invading.

865 — Vikings settle in Britain.

878 — The Peace of Edington partitions England between the Saxons, led by King Alfred, and the Danes.

*Source of the text: An Illustrated History of Britain,  
Britain (by James O'Driscoll),  
history.org.uk*

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