

# A Little Light on the Dark Ages: A Brief Introduction to the Anglo-Saxons

by Mary Ford

*Mary Ford is a Winchester Cathedral Guide with a particular interest in the Anglo Saxon period. A request was made to her to prepare this article after she had given a presentation on the so called Dark Ages to the Guides, and then subsequently to members of Winchester Decorative and Fine Art Society. The Anglo-Saxon period lasted over 600 years, from 410 to 1066. During this period, Britain's political landscape changed dramatically.*

In 1066 Anglo-Saxon England was invaded twice, first from the North and then from the South. One invasion was unsuccessful and the other successful. This article attempts to explain why Anglo-Saxon England was a prize worth fighting for, the jewel in the crown of Europe, and how that came to be after a so called "dark age".

## The Arrival on our Island of the Anglo Saxons

England was part of the Roman province of Britannia on the western outskirts of the Roman Empire. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD the empire was already in decline and finally the legions were recalled to Rome in AD 410 and Britain left to fend for itself. Urbanisation continued in much of mainland Europe but that was not the case in England. Urban life clung on for a couple of generations but soon the cities declined and were abandoned. As in any situation of this type, a power vacuum was created which set native Romano-British tribes one against another. Into this volatile period of instability came another factor: migrant people arrived from across the North Sea, a people who would be known as the Anglo-Saxons. It is probable that warriors from these societies were already here, hired as mercenaries by the Roman legions. They were certainly raiding as pirates around our southern shores because the Romans had built a string of defensive forts from Brancaster, by The Wash, to Portchester in Hampshire, the forts of the Saxon Shore. There are many stories about their arrival in England, mostly formulaic and later fabrications, but it seems likely that they were invited in by one British tribe to help fight against another and subsequently turned against their masters. More people started arriving as settlers. Whether they came in the thousands or were simply a handful who

gained the upper hand is not known. DNA studies have so far proved inconclusive but the most recent show that numbers must have been in the thousands over a period of time. The question must remain open until conclusive proof is obtained.



The main source of information on the arrival of these peoples is the Venerable Bede writing at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> to the early 8<sup>th</sup> century. He lists three main nationalities, the Angles from what is now the Schleswig Holstein area, Saxons from between the rivers Weser and Elbe and the Jutes from Jutland. To these can be added Frisians and the Franks. The Angles settled in the North, the Midlands and East Anglia, while the Saxons favoured the South of the Country and finally the Jutes settled in Kent and the Isle of Wight. The native British either settled peaceably alongside their new neighbours, and became subject to new overlords, or fled westwards where the British tribes remained longest and strongest. There were pockets of native British people still remaining in areas like Lyndsey approximately where South Lincolnshire is today and in the Chilterns. The remainder of the 6<sup>th</sup> and early 7<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a period of instability as tribes fought for supremacy (a "dark age" indeed) but gradually England settled into several kingdoms. (Fig 1)

**Fig 1. Simplified map showing the seven kingdoms of England in Anglo-Saxon times**  
drawn by Julie Adams

## The Heptarchy

The Anglian kingdoms of Northumbria were made up of Bernicia in its northern half and Deira in the southern half. Mercia was in the middle of the country and East Anglia in the east. The Saxon kingdoms emerged in the south: these included Essex, Wessex and Sussex and eventually incorporated the Jutes' stronghold in Kent, the Isle of Wight and a coastal strip of land in South Hampshire through to part of Dorset. These seven Kingdoms, known as the heptarchy, were bounded in the north by remaining British areas. Boundaries were fluid and altered as one area fought against another to gain territory. Each kingdom was ruled by one or several kings at any one time, who were little more than war lords. At any time one king might arise who could demand tribute from the others, a sort of High King which Bede calls a Bretwalda. Early notions of statehood were beginning to emerge and law codes were formulated.

## An Age of Impressive Art

So was this a dark age? Modern historians tend not to use this term nowadays. Recent research and modern scholarship combined with advances in archaeology and forensic science are throwing light on the this formerly dark age, of which we knew little. At this time the Anglo-Saxon peoples were of course pagan but their art was stunning. This was a warrior society whose loyalties were to their tribes and most of all to their lord. Grave goods buried with men included weapons such as shields, spears and knives, and a sword for a man of high status; goods buried with women included beads or pins, and in Kent and the Anglian areas chatelaines of keys. This was the age of the princely burial: Taplow in Buckinghamshire, Prittlewell near Southend, Lakenheath in Suffolk, and most famous of all the ship burial at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, [1] all provide excellent examples. People were buried with the most fantastic objects from far distant places, showing that trade was flourishing, as were contacts with the outside world through the exchange of diplomatic gifts and other goods. The Staffordshire Hoard [2], the largest hoard of Anglo-Saxon gold ever found, was discovered with the help of a metal detector. This hoard was most likely deposited in the 8th century, containing mainly artefacts dating to the 7th and early 8th centuries, with some possibly as old as the mid 6th century. The items include decorative remains of weapons, war gear and some seemingly Christian objects, and can be viewed at The Birmingham Museum. (Fig 2)



**Fig 2. Some of the Objects found in The Staffordshire Hoard** ©Birmingham Museums Trust

Not much is known about Anglo-Saxon paganism save that their chief God was Woden; their religion was probably similar to Norse practices.

## Conversion to Christianity



**Fig 3. The abbey at Iona today**

Photo: Julie Adams

The biggest conquest of the 7<sup>th</sup> century is one which shaped our history for hundreds of years thereafter. This was the reintroduction of Christianity: the term reintroduction is used as Britain became Christian at the end of the Roman era and the British tribes remained Christian. Christianity was certainly practised widely in the western regions of the country. This is another example of the country being invaded from the north and the south. The Irish monk Columba had founded a monastery on the Scottish Island of Iona (Fig 3) and subsequent missionary work was undertaken in the northern kingdoms from this base; St Augustine landed in Kent in AD 597 and started his campaign in the south (Figs 4 and 5). However the picture is not quite so straightforward between Celtic practice in the north and Roman in the south. Augustine sent Paulinus to preach and convert King Edwin of Northumbria. Late in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Benedict Biscop who had travelled at least five times to Rome, founded the twin Monasteries of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow (Figs 6 and 7); these monasteries were following the Roman tradition and probably some form of the Rule of St Benedict. The picture is again one of confusion, but the British tradition was considered a heresy. It was possible that the early pagan kings held some priestly function within the tribal society but this function was lost to them when it passed to anointed Christian priests and bishops.



**Fig 4. St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury**

Photo Roger Twigg



**Fig 5. St Augustine, Jane Austen window, Winchester Cathedral**

Photo: Simon Newman



**Fig 6. Remains of Abbey at Jarrow**



**Fig 7. The Anglo-Saxon church at Monkwearmouth**

Photos: Julie Adams

To retain some influence in the religion of this new world, kings would found monasteries and nunneries headed by a member of their family, who was expected to wield influence in ecclesiastical matters and also to pray for the good of the royal household. In this way a good deal of land passed into the Churches' hands. One anomaly of this time was the double house of monks and nuns always ruled over by a woman. This gave aristocratic women their only chance of authority other than queenship. Things finally came to a head between the Roman and Celtic factions at the Synod of Whitby in AD 664, held at the double monastery ruled over by St Hilda, a very learned and wise women. The main issue at stake was the method of defining the date of Easter. The Roman system was adopted and Roman authority ruled for the next nine hundred years until the reformation.

Most of our information about the conversion of England comes from the Venerable Bede, a true polymath, working in the monastery of Jarrow. Although he rarely left his home, he corresponded widely with many informants to compile his Ecclesiastical History. This should be read with caution as the conversion was not as straightforward as Bede would have us believe, but piecemeal, with frequent setbacks as many Kings apostasised, or their successors returned to their old ways. Some hedged their bets like Raedwald of East Anglia. The conversion was from the top downwards and was probably motivated by political circumstance. Trade and diplomatic contacts with Europe were very desirable. Everyone wanted to be in the club and to be allied with Rome and its "once great empire" certainly had a certain cachet.

The 7<sup>th</sup> century was also the Golden Age of Northumbria. The founding of monasteries allowed learning and writing to flourish. Large numbers of manuscripts were produced in scriptoria, the most famous being the Lindisfarne Gospels, produced by the Monk Eadfrith around the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and now in the British Library.

### **Changes in the 8th Century**

Territorial wars continued into the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and alliances were made and broken. This was the time when Mercia was foremost amongst the local kingdoms. The great and last pagan king, King Penda, was finally killed at the battle of Winwead. During this century "wicks" emerged and flourished: these were the coastal and river trading centres. Most kingdoms had one, for example Hamwic (Southampton) for Wessex, Ipswich for Essex, Norwic or Norwich for East Anglia, Eforic (York) for Northumbria and Lundenwic, (London) comparatively recently uncovered during an archaeological dig under the Strand and Covent Garden. Wicks provided somewhere a boat could be drawn up and trading could flourish. The big personality of the 8<sup>th</sup> century was Offa of Mercia who had international pretensions: he certainly had diplomatic links with Charlemagne but his kingdom fell apart after his death.

At the end of the century a cataclysmic event occurred. In AD 793 the monastery of Lindisfarne was sacked, the monks were murdered, and their treasures carried off by raiders from the sea. The Viking age had begun.

### **Wessex gains in Importance**

The Kingdom of Wessex starts to become more prominent. The West Saxons were derived from a group of people based in the upper Thames valley called the Gewisse. It is interesting that their names all appear to be of British origin from the line of Cerdic. All the kingdoms possessed genealogies going back to supposed founding fathers, nearly always Woden, and to this after the conversion, were added the names of prophets from the Bible. The West Saxons had been through the usual period of expansion, contraction, wars and rival dynastic kings, good and bad, until one name arises at the start of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, that of Egbert. Not much is known about him but he managed to unify his kingdom. He was a force to be reckoned with, and was successful in making Wessex the premier kingdom. His son Ethelwulf was the first West Saxon king to have to start dealing with the Vikings on a larger scale. Their first incursion into Wessex occurred around the year 800 when they had murdered the King's Reeve (his senior official) at Portland. There was however another side to Ethelwulf: he was a pious man who travelled to Rome with his youngest son Alfred, and on the way home picked up a trophy wife, Judith, daughter of the West Frankish king, Charles the Bald. Ethelwulf sent Alfred to Rome a second time, and these journeys had a profound effect on Alfred in later life.

In the reign of one of Alfred's brothers, King Ethelred, the Viking saga took a new turn with the arrival of the great army. The Vikings came to settle, not just raid, and every kingdom fell before them. In Wessex Ethelred and his younger brother Alfred fought nine battles in AD 871 against Guthrum the Viking leader. Ethelred died and Winchester's hero, Alfred, became king. Eventually even he was pushed back to a small area of the Somerset marshes. From here he planned his comeback and finally defeated the Vikings at the battle of Ethendun (Edington). In AD 886 Alfred was able to capture and reoccupy the Roman walled city of London. A peace treaty was worked out, the resulting terms of which meant the Vikings, now styled Danes, controlled land north of the old Roman road, Watling Street, and this land became known as the Danelaw. Alfred and the Saxons took Wessex. Provision was made for the defence of Wessex by the building of burghs: these fortified towns were manned by a garrison according to their size and provided refuge in times of trouble. The largest of these was Winchester. In these centres markets grew up and many provided a location for a mint. Alfred reorganised the army and navy. One of Alfred's greatest achievements was the revival of learning which had already been in decline before the Viking attacks, but was virtually eradicated when the Vikings were in power. As there was hardly a scholar left in England, Alfred recruited learned men from outside his kingdom. Although he himself did not learn to read before middle age he went on to master Latin, and with the help of his advisers proceeded to translate into the Anglo-Saxon language the books he felt were most useful for people to know. It was during Alfred's reign that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle began to be compiled.

During the next half century Alfred's son, King Edward, together with his daughter Ethelflaed and her husband, added Mercia to Wessex, and King Alfred's grandson King Athelstan completed the conquest of England at the Battle of Brunanburh. Wessex was now the centre of rule for what came to be known as England.

### **Developments in the 10th Century**

In the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century a great new religious reform was sweeping the continent. This was the introduction of the Benedictine Rule. The three protagonists in England were Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury, Oswald, Bishop of Worcester and Archbishop of York, and Ethelwold, Bishop of Winchester. Through the help given by the royal patronage of "King Edgar the Peaceable" the Benedictine Rule was introduced to the monasteries and a standard, prescribed way of life was adopted throughout the country. The cult of Saints grew as did the trade in relics.

Alfred the Great's promotion of learning and the arts led to an artistic movement known as the "Winchester School": an example from Winchester museum is shown below in Figure 10. Due to a period of relative peace and security in the third quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the movement prospered and became known throughout Europe. It included illuminated manuscripts, exquisite metal work, carving in ivory and bone as well as stone. It also included fine embroideries which were much sought after.

Figures 8 and 9 show further examples of art from the period. These were excavated from the site to the north of Winchester Cathedral in the 1960s during an archaeological dig supervised by Martin Biddle. These too are on display in Winchester City Museum.



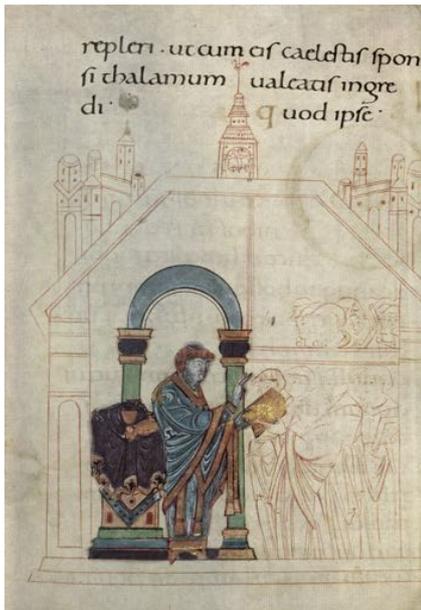
**Fig 8. Part of wall painting dating from before AD 903, and reused in the foundations of New Minster**  
© Winchester Excavations Committee/ Hampshire Cultural Trust [3]



**Fig 9. Fragment of a frieze from Old Minster, possibly illustrating a scene from The Scandinavian Volsunga Saga**  
© Winchester Excavations Committee/ Hampshire Cultural Trust [3]



**Fig 10. Late 10th century silver gilt plaque probably from a bridle mount**  
© Winchester Excavations Committee/ Hampshire Cultural Trust [3]



It is thought that this image could represent St Ethelwold himself, pronouncing the blessing at the dedication of the Old Minster in AD 980

A quote from Birthe Kjolbye-Biddle [4]

*“At the time of its destruction, Old Minster had four towers, three crypts, three apses, at least 24 smaller chapels, an elaborate baptistry, and a splendid nave which in large steps led the eye and person to an elevated altar. A booming organ said to have required 70 strong men to operate it, was placed in the church and bells were rung from the tower. The five stage tower was crowned by a weathercock, adorned in gold, awe-inspiring to behold . . . . .”*

*“It holds the sceptre of rule in its proud talons and stands above the entire populace of Winchester.”*

**Fig 11. A page from the Benedictional of St Ethelwold, written in Winchester in the late 10th century**  
reproduced with kind permission from The British Library.

Image available under a Public Domain Mark from the British Library’s Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts,  
[bl.uk/catalogues/illuminated-manuscripts/reuse/asp](http://bl.uk/catalogues/illuminated-manuscripts/reuse/asp).

A revolution of a different kind was slowly taking place between AD 800 and AD 1000. The counties as we know them today were formed, and England was being divided into shires. These were presided over by Ealdorman, later termed Jarl and then Earl. These areas were further subdivided into hundreds and ultimately into the parish system that persists to this day. In times of need this enabled the fighting men of the county to be called up from the levies of each shire to form an army. Justice could be dispensed and most importantly taxes could be raised. It was this superb system of local government that enabled large sums of money to be collected quickly during the Viking incursions. It was the system which William the Conqueror inherited in 1066 and which ultimately allowed him to compile the Domesday Book.



**Fig 12. Model of Old Minster photographed in Winchester Cathedral** Photo: Simon Newman

During the 10<sup>th</sup> century trade links flourished with Europe and further afield. Markets grew in the expanding towns. Improvements in agriculture allowed surplus production, especially in wool. England was growing wealthy.

### **Vikings Victorious**

Late in the century, during the reign of Ethelred “the Unready” (which means ill advised), the Vikings returned. It seems the King was unable to mount a concerted defence of the realm and resorted to buying the enemy off with ever larger sums of money. Finally, the country was taken over by Danish armies lead by Cnut. Cnut was declared King in AD 1016 but not until after a year of battles in which the Saxons under Ethelred's son Edmund (known as Ironside) were almost victorious. A peace treaty was negotiated but on the premature death of Edmund, Cnut was able to succeed to the whole Kingdom. The Vikings were finally triumphant.

Cnut proved to be an able ruler and came to acquire a North Sea Empire, at one time ruling over England, Denmark, Norway and part of Sweden. Outwardly very pious, he gave lavish gifts to the Church. After the short reigns of his two sons, a son of Ethelred came to the throne, Edward, later known as “the Confessor”. Thus the West Saxon line was re-established in England. King Ethelred's' problems with the Vikings had been compounded by the growing power of the Earls: their feuding and excesses were largely kept under control by Cnut but they were to be a thorn in the side of Edward the Confessor. Not the least of these was the Godwin family.

Earl Godwin of Wessex had risen to power in the reign of King Cnut. By skillfully backing the right side, marrying a relative of King Cnut and changing sides when expedient to do so, he had risen to be, apart from the King, the most powerful man in the kingdom right through to the reign of Edward the Confessor. By the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, he and most of his sons owned all the Earldoms south of the Humber. After his death his son Harold stepped into his Fathers' shoes and became the power behind the throne. During the latter years of Edward the Confessor's reign, the King had all but retired from public life and was concentrating on building his great new Abbey at Westminster, so Harold was effectively running the kingdom.

### **End of an Era and The Norman Conquest**

Invasion was imminent, possibly by Vikings in the North and certainly by William of Normandy in the South. On Edward's death at the beginning of 1066 Harold was elected King by the Witan or counsel of influential men of the kingdom. King Harold kept a portion of his army on standby on the south coast all summer but the contrary winds kept William locked in port on the other side of the Channel. Eventually Harold was obliged to stand down the army in order to attend to the harvest. In September, a Viking army under Harald Hardrada of Norway and Tostig Godwinson, the English King's renegade brother, sailed up the Humber, beached their ships at Riccall, and proceeded to York. Outside the city they were met by a Saxon army led by the northern Earls Edwin and Morcar, but the Vikings were victorious and occupied York. King Harold marched his army north and surprised the Vikings at Stamford Bridge outside York; his army won the day and both Hardrada and Tostig were killed. While recovering from the battle, Harold received the fateful news that William had landed at Pevensey. He forced marched his army south and on 14<sup>th</sup> October fought William in what is known as the Battle of Hastings although the battle actually took place nearby which is now aptly named Battle. With the death of Harold on the battlefield, the Anglo-Saxon age came to an end after 650 years.

The Norman age had begun.

### **References**

#### **1. Sutton Hoo Treasure on Display at The British Museum**

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/visiting/galleries/europe/room\\_41\\_europe\\_ad\\_300-1100.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/visiting/galleries/europe/room_41_europe_ad_300-1100.aspx)

#### **2. The Staffordshire hoard on Display at The Birmingham Museum**

<http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/staritems>

**3. Winchester Excavations Committee/Hampshire Cultural Trust**

**Wall painting**, CG ws 435

**Stone frieze sculpture**, CG ws 98

**Plaque**, possibly a bridle-mount, CG sf 179

**4. Kjolbe-Biddle, Birthe, *Old Minster, St Swithun's Day 1093*, Winchester Cathedral Nine Hundred Years, edited John Crook, pages 13 - 20**

**Bibliography**

Yorke, Barbara, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, Leicester University Press 1995

Swanton, Michael, (translator), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, J M Dent & Sons 1996

Yorke, Barbara, *The Anglo-Saxons*, Sutton Publishing Ltd 1999

Yorke, Barbara, *The Conversion of Britain: Religion Politics and Society in Britain, 600-800*, Longman 2006

Blair, John, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, Oxford University Press 2009

Higham, Nicholas J and Ryan Martin J, *The Anglo-Saxon World*, Yale University Press 2013