

ENGLAND'S FORGOTTEN PAST



RICHARD TAMES

ENGLAND'S FORGOTTEN PAST

THE UNSUNG HEROES & HEROINES,
VALIANT KINGS, GREAT BATTLES & OTHER
GENERALLY OVERLOOKED EPISODES IN
OUR NATION'S GLORIOUS HISTORY

with 70 illustrations



 **Thames & Hudson**

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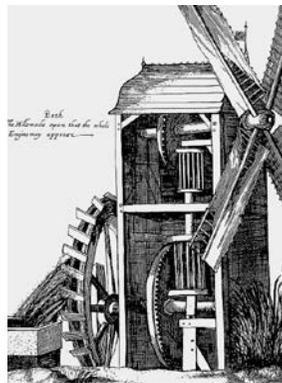
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Half-title *Frontispiece of Introductio*
Lingue Latine, 1495, printed by Wynkyn
de Worde, assistant and successor to
William Caxton.

Frontispiece *Henry, Earl of Richmond*
at the Battle of Bosworth, a fanciful
mid-Victorian representation.

Below, from top
Diagram of a windmill from The
English Improver Improved, 1652.
British sailor and Algerian pirate, c. 1815.

Opposite *Arms of the Bedford Level*
Corporation, 1706.



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✧ FORGETTING OURSELVES ✧

This book is about aspects of England's past that seem to have slipped off the radar of collective memory. Some, like monarchy, the empire, religion and the origins of English identity, are now regarded by many as embarrassing, boring, trivial, marginal or irrelevant. Others, like the history of food or the landscape, have only very recently been recognized as part of 'proper history'.

The inscription on the plinth of the statue of General Havelock in Trafalgar Square proclaims: 'Soldiers! Your labours, your privations, your sufferings and your valour will not be forgotten by a grateful country.' But they have been.

There are a dozen streets in London alone named after Havelock, as well as towns in Ontario and North Carolina, an industrial estate in Singapore, an island in the Indian Ocean, a mid-Victorian hotel in Adelaide, a mine in Swaziland and a seaside village in New Zealand. But could one passer-by in a hundred now say who he was or what he did to merit a memorial at London's very heart?

There is no entry for Tangier in the *Oxford Companion to British History*, yet Charles II spent 20 years and £2,000,000 – about three times what it cost to build St Paul's Cathedral – trying to establish a naval base there. It is as though it never happened.

The entry for the Northumbrian Lindisfarne Gospels in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* runs to just 56 words – and fails to note that they represent the first example of Christian scripture written in English.

Although England and the English represent the central focus of this book, it treats them both as somewhat permeable notions, fuzzy at the edges. Hoisting his famous signal that 'England expects that

every man will do his duty', Nelson must have been aware that only about half the men under his command were actually English.

The empire, like the navy, was British and in both the Scots, Welsh and Irish played prominent, often eminent, parts. However, the values, institutions and lifestyles that empire represented and propagated were predominantly English. Hence the casual way in which throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries the terms 'Britain' and 'England' were used interchangeably – much as they are by many people in other countries to this day.

It is a paradox of globalization that it has sharpened the sense of distinctiveness of many national and ethnic groups, with both positive and negative effects, ranging from the vigorous revival of the Welsh language to the brutal break-up of former Yugoslavia. The reactions of the English have been confused. On the one hand, the St George's flag

has increasingly come to replace the Union

flag on sporting occasions. On the other, a substantial minority still don't know when St George's Day is.

If the English can't remember who they were they run the risk of not knowing who they are. Perhaps a rummage around in the cluttered attic of England's past might be helpful – or, at least, entertaining.



St George has enjoyed widespread and enduring popularity in England since the Middle Ages – this image is taken from a fifteenth-century manuscript – but how did this Roman soldier become so integral to our country's self-image?

MAKING ENGLAND ENGLISH



*The knowledge of past events...forms a main distinction
between brutes and rational creatures, for brutes...
do not know...about their origins, their race and the
events and happenings in their native lands.*

HENRY OF HUNTINGDON, *HISTORIA ANGLORUM*, c. 1130

Americans have an annual holiday to mark when their nation began. The English have largely forgotten how theirs did. ‘English’ history conventionally began with the Romans and ‘English’ kings were named and numbered only from the Norman Conquest onwards.

The period between the Romans and the Normans has pretty much vanished from popular remembrance, largely ignored in the classroom and – with the exception of King Arthur (whoever he was) – apparently of no interest to the makers of movies.

Yet the Anglo-Saxon centuries established the basic institutions that have shaped the nation’s life ever since – its language and its laws, its religion and its monarchy. From pennies and parishes to acres and aldermen, the Anglo-Saxon imprint still survives today.

Opposite *Definitely not the Age of Enlightenment: eighteenth-century representations of ‘Ancient Britons’ as tattooed head-hunters and spear-carrying Amazons.*

MADE BY INVADERS?

Traditionally, school history ignored the ‘Ancient Britons’, even though they were ‘here first’. DNA analysis now implies that they never went away and that a far higher proportion of today’s population than was ever imagined may in fact be descended from them.

Successive influxes of Jews, Flemings, Dutch, Huguenots, Italians, Germans and Irish were likewise overlooked. Henrietta Marshall’s *Our Island Story* told how England’s make-up was produced by successive ‘invasions’ – Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Viking and Norman. But each was quite different from the others both in its character and its effects.

WHAT’S THIS PLACE CALLED?

The first known account of the British Isles was written by Pytheas of Marseilles, a Greek, in the late fourth century BC. He called its people ‘Pritani’, probably meaning ‘painted people’. Caesar and later Latin authors wrote this as Britanni – hence Britannia for their home and the name of the new province.



✧ THE ROMAN INTERLUDE ✧

The conquest credited to the Roman emperor Claudius in AD 43 was, indeed, a classic invasion – a military expedition for permanent annexation. The Romans swiftly stamped their supremacy with statement architecture – a triumphal arch at their initial base, Richborough, in Kent, and a massive temple honouring Claudius at Colchester, in Essex. Later historians were not impressed. In the words of Suetonius, writing in AD 120:

Claudius' sole campaign was of little importance.... He crossed the Channel without incident; and was back in Rome six months later. He had fought no battles and suffered no casualties, but reduced a large part of the island to submission. His triumph was a very splendid one.

Suetonius appears to be deliberately missing the point. Conquest is about politics, victory is merely the means. Crippled, stammering Claudius, new to the throne and expected to be a puppet, had done what Julius Caesar had failed to – taken over a distant, mysterious island supposedly rich in gold and pearls. And his army must have inflicted casualties even if it suffered few. To be awarded a triumphal procession a commander must have killed at least 5,000 of the enemy – 4,999 wouldn't do.

ROMANIZATION

A Roman frontier was rolled forward to take in what was desirable and defensible – basically England and part of South Wales (the bit with the gold). Scotland was later screened off by Hadrian's Wall. Ireland was ignored.

Veterans were rewarded with confiscated land. A Romanized elite, mostly Gauls, was installed to exploit the land for grain, tin, livestock and slaves, and local luxuries like gold, pearls, oysters and jet.

The historian Tacitus explained how his father-in-law Agricola matched military conquest with cultural subversion:

To make a people which was scattered and barbarous, and therefore prone to warfare, grow accustomed to peace... Agricola educated the sons of the chiefs... instead of loathing Latin they became eager to speak it... Roman dress came into fashion. The next step was towards the temptations of... lounging in arcades, baths and refined dinner-parties. The unsuspecting Britons spoke of such novelties as "civilization", when in fact they were only aspects of their enslavement.

There was never any thought that 'Britannia' might be Romanized by a mass immigration of Romans. If the local gene pool was diversified it was by intermarriage with soldiers and slaves from homelands as varied and distant as Syria, Egypt, Greece, Nubia, the Low Countries and the Rhineland.

CAMP GOVERNMENT

The Roman occupation was essentially military. It was imposed by the legions and imploded when they left. Enduring place names illustrate the point. Roman legions on the march routinely constructed a fortified camp – 'castra' – every night, destroying it next morning by filling in the defensive ditches with the earth taken from them to build the previous night's ramparts.

Permanent forts frequently became the nuclei of towns. But it wasn't the Romans who went around calling everywhere 'something-caster'. To them Winchester was *Venta Belgarum* – the market of the Belgae tribe. It was the Anglo-Saxon adopted word *ceaster* that indicated a former Roman fort, camp or city – hence Chester, Manchester, Rochester, Dorchester, Winchester, Chichester; but also Leicester, Gloucester, Worcester, Cirencester. In the north of England we find the variants *Lancaster* and *Doncaster*; and, in the south (and less obviously), *Wroxeter* and *Exeter*.

The Anglo-Saxons were also impressed by the Romans' superbly engineered highways and lifted the word 'strata' to mean 'paved road', which became the place name element 'strat', 'stret', 'streat' or '-street' – as in Stratford or Stretford.



So that's you gone then, is it? A fourteenth-century illustrator imagines the departure of the Romans with no concessions to period costume.

When the Romans withdrew their legions after 408–10, the cash economy collapsed, cities were deserted, the fine roads decayed, Latin died out and Christianity, a late implant, withered. The Romans never really Romanized the province they called 'Britannia' beyond leaving it a name for another, greater empire.

*Legate, I come to you in tears – My cohort ordered home!
I've served in Britain forty years. What should I do in Rome?
Here is my heart, my soul, my mind – the only life I know.
I cannot leave it all behind. Command me not to go!*

RUDYARD KIPLING, *THE ROMAN CENTURION'S SONG*

✧ FIRST KNIGHT? ✧

*No figure on the borderline of history and mythology
has wasted so much of the historian's time.*

J. N. L. MYRES, *THE ENGLISH SETTLEMENTS*, 1986

King Arthur probably never existed – but is still heading towards his 1,500th birthday.

MONKISH MEMORIES

The evolution of the legend of Arthur occurred over many years, even centuries. The groundwork was laid when, some time before 547, the monk Gildas, Britain's first known historian, described the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in a cheery number entitled *Concerning the Fall and Conquest of Britain*. In this he referred to a Saxon defeat at Mons Badonicus – Mount Badon – which stemmed the invaders' advance for half a century.

Then, in about 600, the Welsh war epic *Y Gododdin* backhandedly praised the warrior Gwawrddur as 'no Arthur' – suggesting that the character was already in the collective consciousness. The Welsh monk Nennius, writing in c. 830, named an Arthur as 'dux bellorum' (leader of wars), a dozen times victorious over the Saxons, including at Mount Badon.

R. G. Collingwood, an Oxford don, suggested in 1936 that 'Arthur' might have been a freelance commander of Roman-style cavalry who confounded lumbering Saxon infantry with hit-and-run tactics.

HISTORICAL HYPE

Lecturing at Oxford in the 1130s, the inventive Geoffrey of Monmouth raised Arthur to superhero status and embellished his story with the inclusion of treacherous 'Modred', a miraculous sword, mysterious Avalon and a magician, Merlin.

TRACING ARTHUR'S FOOTPRINTS

The appeal of Arthur's legend has scattered England (and in fact the whole of Britain) with locations allegedly linked with the king and his court. The majority of 'Arthurian' sites are, in reality, prehistoric tumuli (Bwrdd Arthur in Wales), henges (King Arthur's Round Table in Cumbria) or hill-forts (Moel Arthur in Wales), which were built centuries before Arthur is supposed to have lived. Several more Arthur-related sites can be found in Celtic-speaking Brittany, the region through which knowledge of the cult first spread to mainland Europe.

ARTHUR'S BRITAIN

Cornwall has Arthur's Bed and Merlin's Rock.

Cumbria has a Stone Arthur. Ancient copper mines at Alderley Edge, Cheshire, are supposed to house the sleeping Arthur and his knights (sadly this tradition dates back only to the nineteenth century).

Wales has three megalithic tombs called Coetan Arthur; two places called Arthur's Stone and King Arthur's Cave.

Near the abandoned Antonine Wall that had once separated Roman Britannia from the Picts stood Arthur's O'en (oven) – first recorded in 1293, it was in fact a ruined Roman building.

Edinburgh is dominated by the spectacularly rocky outcrop known as Arthur's Seat – a long way from where Arthur's capital might have been.

Slaughterbridge over the Rivel Camel in Cornwall is claimed to have been the site of Arthur's last battle, Camlann.

MOUNT BADON

Geoffrey of Monmouth located Mount Badon near Bath, mentioning hot springs. The modern tourist authorities do not go out of their way to contradict him.

The nearest modern name is Badbury, of which there are five, scattered from Dorset to Lincolnshire. The best bet is in Wiltshire, near Swindon, where Liddington Castle recalls a hill-fort guarding a Roman road intersection.

Gildas, writing within living memory of the battle allegedly fought at Mount Badon, described it as at least partly a siege, happening in a populated area with fortifications associated with 'the last of the Romans', whom he called Ambrosius Aurelianus.

GLASTONBURY

Thirteenth-century legend tells us that in AD 63 Joseph of Arimathea came to England with a chalice of Christ's blood and built the first English church at Glastonbury. According to the New Testament it was Joseph of Arimathea who arranged for the burial of the crucified Christ.

The chalice became the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend and was said to have been hidden by Joseph in the Chalice Well, at the foot of Glastonbury Tor; the 500-foot hill standing east of the town.

Glastonbury Thorn, an early variety of hawthorn, said to flower on Christmas Day, is supposed to have leapt out of the earth when Joseph of Arimathea struck the ground at Glastonbury with his staff.

CAMELOT

The location of Arthur's capital has been attributed to the former Roman settlements of Caerleon and Caerwent in Monmouthshire, to Killibury, Camelford and Tintagel

The ghost of Camelot? The hillfort at South Cadbury as depicted in 1719 – by then a matter of antiquarian curiosity rather than national pride.

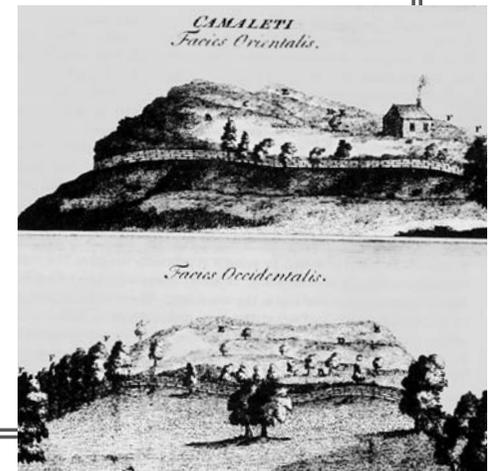
in Cornwall, to the Iron Age hill-fort at South Cadbury in Somerset, to Winchester in Hampshire, to Colchester (Roman Camulodunum) in Essex and to Almondbury (also Roman Eborac) in Yorkshire.

TINTAGEL

Both Geoffrey of Monmouth and Sir Thomas Malory identified Tintagel as the birthplace of Arthur. Archaeologists from the University of Glasgow found remains of aristocratic dwellings of c. AD 500 – and a stone inscribed with the word 'Artognou'.

WINCHESTER

On the wall of Winchester's Great Hall is the top of a Round Table. Dating from about 1300, it may have been made on the orders of Edward I and was painted in heraldic style in 1522 on the orders of Henry VIII.



William of Malmesbury, a decade *before* Geoffrey, had noted that ‘this Arthur is the hero of many wild tales...but assuredly deserves to be the object of reliable history rather than of false and dreaming fable’. However, this did nothing to stop Geoffrey’s imaginative *History of the Kings of Britain* being a huge hit, widely plagiarized across Europe.

FURNISHING A SOLUTION

Frenchman Chrétien de Troyes, writing in *c.* 1170, added in courtly love, Camelot as a glittering capital, the quest for the Holy Grail and the Round Table. The table appears again around 1200 when Layamon produced the first Arthur tale in English, filling up 16,000 alliterative lines. According to Layamon, Arthur’s Christmas revels were spoiled by quarrels over who should sit where at his table so he...

went to Cornwall and caused a marvellous table to be made by a carpenter, which had three remarkable properties; it could seat sixteen hundred; it was arranged that the high should be even with the low; it could be carried with Arthur wherever he wished to ride. The result was that all were satisfied.

BONES AND BUILDING

In 1191 – that is, shortly after a disastrous fire in 1184 that had led to a massively expensive rebuilding programme – the alleged bones of Arthur were ‘discovered’ at Glastonbury Abbey. This was the same Glastonbury Abbey that claimed to have been founded by Joseph of Arimathea, the guardian of the Holy Grail.

In This Sign Conquer? A lead cross from Glastonbury, claimed to have belonged to King Arthur, the archetype of the Christian warrior against the forces of darkness.



THE ORDER OF THE GARTER

Legends such as that of King Arthur were critical in establishing the chivalric orders. The foremost order of this kind in England is The Most Noble Order of the Garter.

Membership is limited to 25 ‘Knights Companions’ (including the Prince of Wales), plus the Sovereign as patron.

The motto of the Order – *Honi soit qui mal y pense* (Shame on him who thinks ill of it) – refers to the royal slogan for Edward III’s Crécy campaign of 1346.

Foreigners may be admitted as ‘extra knights’.

Sir Winston Churchill refused the Garter after his electoral defeat in 1945 – ‘I can hardly accept the Order of the Garter from the king after the people have given me the Order of the Boot.’ He relented in 1953, as Prime Minister to the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth II.

Thirty-six Garter Knights have been beheaded.

The Order’s colours – gold on blue – allude to the royal arms of France.

ROYAL RESPECT

Edward I visited Glastonbury in 1278 to honour Arthur’s supposed grave – just as he was conquering Wales outright. Perhaps this was an attempt to add an Arthurian lustre to his war – or maybe a heavy-handed gesture to remind the Welsh that their legendary hero was really dead.

In 1348 Edward III, described by a contemporary as ‘unmatched since the days of Arthur, one-time King of England’, was inspired to found the Order of the Garter (see above).

...the King...took pleasure to new rebuild the castle of Windsor, the which was begun by King Arthur; and there first began the Table Round, whereby sprang the fame of so many noble knights throughout all the world.

JEAN FROISSART, *CHRONICLES*

Later on, Henry VII, a Welshman with a shaky claim to England's throne, named his eldest son Arthur to bolster his new regime with a hijacked heritage.

THE LAST WORD?

Many readers today probably know the Arthur stories from Sir Thomas Malory's version, *Le Morte d'Arthur*. This was possibly compiled in around 1469 and was printed by William Caxton in 1485 – a timely prompt for Henry VII's exercise in royal rebranding.

Malory may have been one of several individuals but was probably a Warwickshire knight, charged with assault, theft and rape, who compiled his version of Arthur to kill time awaiting trial in a Southwark gaol. Confusingly Malory says the magic sword Excalibur was drawn from a stone *and* given to the king by the Lady of the Lake. Malory also predicted Arthur would one day return to rule Britain again:

*Many men say that there is written on his tomb this verse:
"Here lies Arthur: the once and future king".*

DEATH OF A HERO?

Arthur's legend peaked in the Middle Ages, and by the seventeenth century this figure who had once been revered throughout Christendom was only a hero in Britain. By the following century he was of interest only to antiquarians, but the nineteenth century saw a new revival of interest when William Dyce painted Arthurian scenes in the rebuilt Houses of Parliament. A little later, Alfred Tennyson's epic retelling of the Arthur legend, *The Idylls of the King*, gained cult status among Victorian readers.

Arthur was reborn yet again through T. H. White, former schoolmaster, recluse and expert on falconry. Beginning in 1939 with a children's book *The Sword in the Stone*, he followed up with a trilogy of adult novels, collectively published in 1958 as *The Once and Future*

King. This inspired the smash hit musical, *Camelot*. The most recent movie treatment has re-cast Arthur as a Roman cavalryman fighting to save Britain from brutal Saxons – which is where we came in.

✧ THE SAXON SETTLERS ✧

*Behind the feet of the Legions and before the Northmen's ire,
Rudely but greatly begat they the body of state and shire.*

RUDYARD KIPLING, *THE KING'S TASK*, 1911

The 'Anglo-Saxons' were initially different peoples – Angles, Saxons, Jutes and a few Frisians – from where modern-day Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands meet. What did they think they were coming to?

MOVING INTO A VACUUM?

There were Saxons living in 'Britannia' well before the Roman legions left, probably hired as mercenaries to fend off other Saxon pirates. Perhaps they told their relatives about Britain. The only contemporary authority for the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in the fifth century is gloomy Gildas. According to him the Anglo-Saxons arrived in three ships – hardly an invasion fleet, especially as they brought their families with them. Nevertheless, he paints a picture of terrible devastation as a result of their arrival:

All the major towns were laid low... laid low, too, all the people... in the middle of the squares the foundation stones of high walls and towers... holy altars, fragments of corpses, covered with a purple crust of congealed blood, looked as though they had been churned up in some hellish wine-press. There was no burial to be had.

Archaeology fails to support the Gildas apocalypse scenario, however. There are no remains of large-scale lethal confrontations between Romano-British forces and Anglo-Saxon intruders, nor anything to

suggest a mass exodus of the existing population from the east to the west, seeking refuge from invading hordes.

If there was a drastic fall in Britain's population in the immediate post-Roman period – for example, caused by a major plague epidemic – newcomers might have been tempted by the prospect of an empty land.

SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS ARE JUTES

In numbers, the Jutes were very much junior partners compared to the Angles and Saxons, but they kept a distinct identity, settling mainly in Kent, the Isle of Wight, and Hampshire around the Solent. This led to some curious anomalies:

- The Isle of Wight was the last part of England to accept Christianity – in 686, almost a century after Augustine had begun the conversion of Kent. ('Accept' probably isn't the right word – they were massacred until the survivors submitted.)
- The Jutish custom of partible inheritance (that is, property being divided equally among heirs rather than all going to the eldest) is said to account for Kent becoming a county of independent yeoman farmers rather than large estates.
- Tribal differences between the Jutes may also account for the establishment of separate dioceses for Canterbury and Rochester and the surviving distinction between 'Men of Kent' (born east of the Medway) and 'Kentish Men' (born to the west).

Opposite *The Mask of Monarchy: helmet of Raedwald, King of East Anglia, buried at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, c. 624-25. Decorated with gold fittings and garnets from India, it was the work of a Scandinavian master.*

COEXISTENCE AND CONVERSION

The newcomers arrived as pagans, who cremated or buried their dead with grave goods for the afterlife. Christians did not do either, but instead interred corpses in an east–west orientation. Large concentrations of pagan burials and an absence of Christian ones would imply the displacement of one population by another. Instead we find pagan and Christian burials of the same date at the same locations, implying an overlap of belief systems or at least a coexistence.

Anglo-Saxons brought distinctive forms of dress and adornment, pottery and weaponry, building styles and ceremonial observances. Gradually these 'English' ways and the 'English' language became dominant everywhere except what was now 'the Celtic fringe'. However, this did not necessarily happen by force: the new ways were also adopted voluntarily by people eager for a lifestyle better adapted to an abandoned imperial outpost. This was cultural conquest, not so much by invasion as by imitation.



WAR WORDS

On the other hand Anglo-Saxon vocabulary *was* distinctly blood-thirsty (even the word itself is a compound of two Anglo-Saxon words). The tenth-century epic poem *The Battle of Maldon* runs to only 325 lines but includes more than 70 different words to do with fighting – plus almost 40 for prince or leader. There are seventeen synonyms for warrior (spear-bearer, retainer, slaughterous wolf), a dozen for battle, ten for army or troop, eight for spear and four for sword. Only about ten of the terms survive in modern language – the rest were largely replaced by words from the victorious Normans.

THE VILLAGE PEOPLE

Another possible scenario is that the Anglo-Saxons came in small numbers but operated an apartheid system and outbred whoever their laws defined as inferior. These unfortunates were called the *wealhas*, a word equating foreigner and slave (and which has survived in the word ‘Welsh’).

The Anglo-Saxons were farmers, not city-slickers. Although they did found trading-ports at Hamwic (Southampton), Norwich, Ipswich and Sandwich, they were largely responsible for the thousands of villages whose names include the elements *-ing* (people of), *-ham* (home) or *-ton* (settlement) – many of which are now embedded in vast cities like London, as in Balham, Peckham, Ealing, Barking, Islington or Kensington.

LAYING DOWN THE LAW

Victorian scholars celebrated the Anglo-Saxon origins of the Common Law to stress its antiquity and continuity. To modern eyes its ancient practices may seem less appealing:

- Apart from political prisoners, imprisonment was rare. Routine punishments included fines, mutilation and banishment.
- Equality before the law was an alien notion. There were different rights for different social categories, such as assimilated Welshmen.
- To prevent blood-feuds, injuries were compensated by the payment of *wergild*, which varied with social rank. The loss of an eye or hand by a landowning thegn was reckoned to be worth six times as much as a similar injury done to a mere ceorl or freeman.

THE MONK WHO INVENTED ✧ THE ENGLISH ✧

Historia Ecclesiae Gentis Anglorum (*The Ecclesiastical History of the English Peoples*) is hardly a snappy title but it was a historical milestone, because it spoke of the English as a single people. It also made its author, Bede, the greatest historian for five centuries either side of his lifetime. The sparse details Bede tacked on about his own life also make him the first Englishman to write an autobiography.

Bede spent his whole life in the twin monasteries of Jarrow and Monkwearmouth, never venturing further than York, but was famed for his learning across Christendom. Although he did not invent it, it was Bede who popularized the notion of AD – ‘Anno Domini’ – the idea that Christ’s birth divided all history. (‘BC’ – ‘Before Christ’ – said in English, not Latin, was a back formation, only coined in the eighteenth century.)

GOING SOMEWHERE

Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* was completed in around 731, near the end of his life. It was less an account of events than of their significance, addressed to a people and posterity.

Documenting the conversion to Christianity of the English, the *History* was intended to provide both a record of the past and an inspiration for the future. This was a history with a *direction* – driven by the idea that the Angles, Saxons and Jutes constituted one people, the English, and that they could be united into one Christian kingdom under one ruler.

Bede’s *History* also aims to show that events prove God’s power. It aims at accuracy, not objectivity. Don’t expect a fair-minded account of paganism. Written for a warrior people, it proclaims a good Christian life as the best guarantee of victory. A most memorable passage

described faith as the answer to man's ignorance of his own life's purpose:

The present life of men on earth, O king, compared with time unknowable, seems like this...as if, sitting at dinner with your chiefs in wintertime...a sparrow from outside flew swiftly through the hall...in that time it is untouched by the storm; but...in a moment...it soon returns to the winter and slips from sight. Man's life appears like that...of what may follow it, or what preceded it, we know nothing.

NORTHERN LIGHTS

Bede was the flower of a 'Northumbrian Renaissance', which also produced the exquisite Lindisfarne Gospels (see opposite). He owed his own education to the library amassed by Benedict Biscop, the aristocratic founder of Bede's monastery, who had rejected Celtic frugality in favour of Mediterranean magnificence, importing stonemasons and glaziers from Gaul. At the other end of the social scale was Caedmon, a cowherd with the

miraculous ability to turn Bible stories into simple Saxon songs.

Alongside his *History*, Bede wrote the biography of the hermit St Cuthbert, whose grave was credited with many miracles (see opposite). Bede is also the chief source for the life of St Egbert,



Desk jockey: through his prolific writings monastery-bound Bede established a scholarly reputation throughout Europe and down the centuries.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD...

The Lindisfarne Gospels constitute the first Christian scripture in English – though that was not why they were originally made. Lindisfarne, also known as Holy Island, lies a mile off the Northumberland coast, making it attractively isolated for a monastery. One of its most distinguished residents was the reclusive, austere St Cuthbert, successively prior; hermit and bishop, who died there in 687.

Cuthbert's grave drew pilgrims even before his corpse was translated to a grand tomb in 698. The making of the Lindisfarne Gospels was probably linked with that event. The calligrapher was probably Eadfrith, Cuthbert's successor as bishop.



Reading between the lines: initial page from the opening chapter of the Gospel according to St Mark.

THE BOOK

Each Gospel – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – is preceded by a page portrait of the saintly author; a 'carpet' page incorporating Anglo-Saxon, Insular ('Celtic') and Byzantine motifs, and a page for the initial letter of the following text. The work took about three years to complete, not including the labour in making hundreds of vellum pages from sheepskins, preparing inks and paints and creating the elaborate, jewelled binding.

THE JOURNEY

Foreshadowed by violent storms, in 875 Viking raids led the monks to abandon Lindisfarne. Wandering the mainland with Cuthbert's corpse and

their treasured Gospels, the monks eventually settled in Chester-le-Street. Here, in around 960, an Anglo-Saxon translation in Northumbrian dialect and penned in reddish ink was inserted between the lines of the Latin text by Aldred of Chester-le-Street.

THE OUTCOME

Cuthbert was finally laid to rest in Durham Cathedral in 995. As with many of England's early saints, his shrine was vandalized at the Dissolution and the cover of the Gospels torn off for its embellishments.

another Northumbrian, who established the cathedral school of York. One of Egbert's own pupils, St Willibrord, converted the fierce Frisians and became Archbishop of Utrecht. Willibrord's protégé, St Boniface, led the conversion to Christianity of Germany. Alcuin, another Northumbrian and product of the York school became a one-man think-tank to the great Charlemagne, in his court at Aachen.

LEGACY

Viking raids forced the abandonment of Jarrow and Monkwearmouth in about 800. Bede's alleged remains were discovered in the eleventh century and moved to Durham Cathedral, where they now lie in the subdued splendour of the Galilee Chapel. By the ninth century Bede was already referred to as 'Venerabilis', but it was only in 1899 that Pope Leo XIII formally recognized this venerable historian as a doctor of the church.

✧ THE ONE, THE ONLY... ✧

Alfred of Wessex is the only English king to be called 'the Great' but is best remembered for burning some cakes.

The Victorians, however, hailed him as the founder of the navy and the saviour of the nation. As far as they were concerned, without Alfred there wouldn't have been an England at all. Alfred also raised English to the dignity of a learned language and was the first monarch to write a book. The next was Henry VIII, some six centuries later.

To mark the thousandth anniversary of Alfred's death in 899 a statue was raised in his memory at Winchester, the capital of his kingdom. The king is portrayed as a beefy warrior raising a mighty sword in triumph – but holding it point downward, like a Christian cross. A wheezing figure hunched over a book by candlelight would have been nearer the reality. Throughout his life Alfred battled with constant illnesses, possibly including epilepsy.

WESSEX WARRIOR

In 871, the year he became king, a see-saw struggle with the Vikings took the kingdom of Wessex to the brink of extinction. Alfred fled to the Somerset marshes around Athelney and somehow managed to raise an army and win a hard-fought victory at Ethandune (Edington) in 878 – a date to stand beside 1588, 1805 and 1940 as an hour of deliverance.

Alfred then astounded his enemies by *not* massacring them. Instead he stood godfather to their leader, Guthrum, who accepted Christianity and the division of England along an agreed frontier. Alfred then stabilized what he had saved by creating some 30 fortified *burhs*, each within a day's march of another for mutual support.

To garrison the *burhs* Alfred reorganized the *fyrð* (militia) to serve in rotation so that the harvest was not neglected. Manpower needs were precisely calculated to allow for four spearmen to defend each pole (= 16.6 feet) of defensive circuit – plus another tenth as a mobile reserve. As we learn from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a fleet of super-sized ships was built to take the fight to the Vikings by sea: 'Some had 60 oars, some more. They were both swifter...and also higher than the others...'

BURHS INTO BOROUGHS

Once their strategic purpose was over, these *burhs* suffered various fates. Some, like Bath, Chichester and Winchester, were revivals of Roman sites and resumed city status. Some, like Oxford and Stamford, grew into significant settlements, or modest market towns like Shaftesbury and Malmesbury. Others, like Lydford, Halwell and Pilton in Devon and Lyng, Langport and Axbridge in Somerset, declined into villages. At Wallingford and Wareham both the original street-plan and features of the Saxon defences are still visible.

In 886 the abandoned walled city of Roman Londinium was repopulated and refortified to become Lundenburgh, marking the beginning of London's continuous existence ever since.

OUR STORY...BY OURSELVES

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is the first history of a European people written by themselves in their own language, rather than in Latin. Begun on the orders of King Alfred, the surviving versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* together constitute the single most important source for the early history of England.

CONTENTS LIST

Drawing on the work of Bede, other annals, genealogies and lists of kings and bishops, the authors compiled a chronology down to their own times and then recorded what they regarded as significant contemporary events.

The peaceable years of the mid-tenth century receive much less attention than the long and troubled reign of Aethelred the Unready. The *Chronicle* is also excellent for the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042–66) and some versions go up to the mid-twelfth century.

SIX SURVIVALS

Of the seven known manuscripts, one was almost completely destroyed in a fire in 1731 – but fortunately had already been transcribed. The other six are known by letters:

The oldest, Ms. A, was written, probably at Winchester, by a single hand up to the year 891, then in various hands until 975, then tampered with at Canterbury. It is now at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

Mss. B and C, in the British Library, are copies made at Abingdon.

Ms. F, also in the British Library, is an abridgement in English and Latin.

Mss. D and E, now at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, incorporate much material about the north of England.

Ms. E, made at Peterborough, was written as a single stretch up to 1121 and then kept up until 1155, giving a famous account of the anarchy of the reign of King Stephen, 'when men said openly that Christ and his saints slept...'.
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The *Chronicle* incorporates a triumphant eulogy for the greatest battle of the Anglo-Saxon age. Fought in 937 at Brunanburh – an unknown, probably Northumbrian, location – it saw Athelstan annihilate an allied force of Vikings and Scots:

*Never yet in this island
 was there a greater slaughter
 of peoples felled by the sword's
 edges.*

PROMOTING THE LANGUAGE

Law codes, incorporating elements from Kent and Mercia, were consolidated into a single corpus.

Alfred himself, by the age of 40, had mastered both Latin and English. To repair the Viking devastation of monasteries, the chief centres of learning, Alfred inaugurated a programme of translations from Latin into English of books 'most necessary for all men to know'.

...all the youth now in England of free men, who are rich enough to be able to devote themselves to it, be set to learn as long as they are not fit for any other occupation, until they are able to read English writing well.

ALFRED THE GREAT, PREFACE TO *PASTORAL CURE*

Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* was promoted as a manual for bishops. Each copy was accompanied by a magnificent gold enamelled aestel (pointer). The handle of one, now known as the 'Alfred Jewel', was miraculously found in a Somerset marsh and is on display in Oxford's Ashmolean Museum. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* provided a historical justification for the king's own efforts as a defender of church and state.



A LEGEND IN HIS LIFETIME

By the 890s Alfred, King of Wessex, was calling himself 'King of the Angles and Saxons'. Coins show him wearing a diadem like a Roman emperor. Charters refer to him as 'King of the English'. Neighbouring, formerly rival, Mercia acknowledged his overlordship, as did all the English not under Danish rule.

When the Vikings returned to the attack in 892 they were beaten back, with most of four years of fighting taking place outside the territory of the West Saxons.

The kingdom held.

Opposite *The Alfred Jewel, recovered by miraculous chance in 1693.*

WHO WAS THE FIRST KING ✧ OF ENGLAND? ✧

Though Alfred of Wessex was referred to as ‘King of the English’, in reality he was only king of the English not under Danish control.

AFTER ALFRED

Alfred’s son, Edward the Elder (reigned 899–924), captured the five Danish-held boroughs of Leicester, Stamford, Nottingham, Derby and Lincoln, and annexed Mercia – thus controlling all England south of the Humber. Edward’s eldest son, Athelstan (reigned 924–39), took Danish-held York and received the homage of the rulers of Wales and Scotland. Athelstan also issued a fine coinage for national circulation, styling himself *Rex totius Britanniae* – King of all Britain.

We declare...that there shall be one coinage throughout the king’s dominions and that there shall be no minting except in a port. And if a minter be convicted of striking bad money, the hand with which he was guilty shall be cut off and set up on his smithy.

LAWS OF ATHELSTAN

Athelstan’s half-brother, Edmund, also known as the Elder (reigned 939–46), succeeded him at eighteen and was dead at 25. Although he conducted successful campaigns against the Vikings in the Midlands and Northumbria, he lost control of York.

Pious Edred (reigned 946–55), brother of Edmund, reclaimed York and took Northumbria when its Danish ruler, the picturesquely named Eric Bloodaxe, was killed in battle in 954. Edred carelessly died unmarried, aged 32, so he was followed by his 15-year-old nephew, Edwy the Fair (reigned 955–59), son of Edmund. Edwy proved weak and incompetent, capable only of holding on to Wessex, while Mercia and Northumbria were ruled by his successor, Edgar. Edwy’s death at 19 (he was probably murdered) was less a disaster than a release.

EDGAR, CROWNED KING

The name of Edgar (reigned 959–75) means ‘rich in spears’ but he became known as ‘the Peaceable’. The grandson of Alfred, teenage Edgar inherited a stable realm, free from threat.

Edgar enthusiastically supported St Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury, in re-establishing monasteries as centres of learning. Edgar also won over his subjects in the formerly Danish east and north of England.

However, Edgar’s coronation was deferred for fourteen years. Why precisely this should be, we don’t know. Perhaps the king’s extramarital track record may have required years of penance and patronage to work off. Perhaps Dunstan wanted Edgar to prove himself and his commitment to reviving the Church.

Whatever the reason, by the time of his coronation Edgar had passed 30, then the lowest customary age for becoming a priest (since Christ’s ministry began when he was 30).

Edgar’s predecessors were formally recognized at Kingston-on-Thames, in a procedure that was more an administrative than a ceremonial occasion. Edgar was installed as monarch at Bath Abbey, the first to be *crowned* ‘King of the English’; his wife, Elfrida, was crowned ‘Queen of the English’. Orchestrated by Dunstan on 11 May 873 (Whit Sunday), Edgar’s coronation was modelled on the installation of a Holy Roman Emperor and established the basic pattern for all coronations ever since.

To emphasize the sacral nature of kingship, the solemn pledges Edgar gave to protect the Church and uphold the law were followed by an anointing to symbolize his priestly status. To emphasize the unity of the kingdom Dunstan shared the ceremony with Oswald, Archbishop of York, by birth a Dane.

Edgar’s coronation was noted by all contemporary chroniclers, inspired a national ballad and is commemorated in Bath Abbey today by a stained-glass window.

UNHAPPY SUCCESSORS

In terms of royal authority, however, Edgar's magnificent coronation marked a false dawn, since the king died just two years later. Edgar's eldest son and successor, a mere lad of 12 or 13, was crowned by Dunstan at Kingston-on-Thames but lured to his assassination by his stepmother and is remembered as 'Edward the Martyr'.

Her son, Edward's half-brother, a boy of just ten or 11, would rule for nearly 40 years – disastrously – as Aethelred II (reigned 978–1016), 'the Unready' – a reference, not to habitual tardiness but to his lack of 'raed', wise counsel or advice. Despite serial disasters and humiliations, however, England henceforth held together as one kingdom.

✧ BY GEORGE! ✧

George was... a rich noble under the cruel emperor... Datian, in the province of Cappadocia.... Datian... commanded that George be hung on a gibbet and his limbs torn with iron claws, and torches kindled on both sides... after that... to be tortured with scourges and rubbed with salt; but George remained unhurt.... Thereupon Datian endited this decree, "Take this guilty one... and drag him prone... through all the... stony ways".

AELFRIC, *LIVES OF THE SAINTS*

After which, apparently, it was still necessary to cut his head off with a sword. 'Datian' – the Roman emperor Diocletian – was then struck dead by lightning going home. This version of the martyrdom of St George was written by the English monk Aelfric in about 1000 – with absolutely no mention of a dragon.

WHO'S WHO?

Edward Gibbon, author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, uncharitably identified St George as a blackmarketeering archbishop of Cappadocia who was strangled by a mob.

LIFE OF A LEGEND

George's adoption as patron saint of England occurred only gradually:

700s St George mentioned by Bede.

800s A church dedicated to George is referred to in the will of Alfred the Great.

1098 Crusaders besieging Antioch swear that St George gave them a hand.

1190 The City of London adopts his flag for its ships in the Mediterranean to show they were under Genoese protection.

1222 The Synod of Oxford decrees that his day, 23 April, should be observed as a feast.

1265–66 The saint's story is consolidated in the *Golden Legend* composed by Jacobus de Voragine, Archbishop of Genoa. This tells how George rescued the daughter of a Libyan king from a dragon and in gratitude the king's subjects became Christians.

1348 Edward III adopts the saint as patron of his new Order of the Garter – and he has remained England's hero ever since.

A modern consensus suggests that St George was a high-ranking aristocratic soldier of Diocletian's personal guard who was martyred for refusing to renounce Christianity. He was probably born in around 275 in Nicomedia (modern-day Izmit in Turkey) and died in 303 at Lydda (Lod, in Israel).

The one certain thing about England's patron saint is that he wasn't English. Which may partly explain why he is, or has also been, the patron of Portugal, Genoa, Georgia, Greece, Aragon, Catalonia, Ethiopia, Lithuania, Palestine, Russia, at least fourteen cities, archers, armourers and shepherds, sufferers from herpes, leprosy and syphilis, the Norwegian cavalry, Corinthian FC of São Paulo and the Boy Scouts of America.