

Anglo-Saxon Britain (AD 410 - AD 1066)

1. Newcomers to Britain

1) There have been many invaders who shaped the destiny of Britain and its people, but none left such a permanent mark as the people from ancient Germany and Denmark known as the Anglo-Saxons. How did the Anglo-Saxons come to rule Britain? Well, it seems they were invited! You see, in the 5th century many of the first Anglo-Saxons to arrive in post-Roman Britain were mercenaries /'mɜː .sə.ner.iz/ who had actually been invited by the native Britons to help defend against the Scots. They were made up of two main tribes, the Angles and the Saxons, as well as a smaller tribe, the Jutes but unfortunately for the native people, when their new protectors saw how weak the Britons were, they decided to just take the land for themselves.

2) The Anglo-Saxons met little opposition from the disorganised Britons, and by 660 AD, they controlled most of Britain. The newcomers brought with them their own language which became the ancestor of modern English.

3) Seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms emerged: Kent, Essex, Sussex, East Anglia, Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex (Known as Heptarchy /'hep.tɑː r.ki/). There were many shifts of power between these kingdoms, but over time, Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex dominated the others.

2. Life in Anglo Saxon Britain

4) So what was society like in Anglo-Saxon Britain? Well, despite their mercenary beginnings, the Anglo-Saxon settlers lived as farmers. Being farmers, the Anglo-Saxons chose not to occupy the abandoned Roman buildings. Their houses were simple wooden buildings with people and animals sharing the same living space which helped keep the house warm in winter and the animals safe from wolves and bears. Each farmer usually owned enough land to grow food for a family with women responsible for spinning and weaving thread and for brewing alcohol because the river water was usually too dirty to drink.

5) Local rulers resided in halls which would often host huge feasts. Everyone drank mead and beer, ate roasted meat, exchanged presents and told stories. In place of writing, an oral tradition developed which kept alive tales passed from generation to generation.

6) When it comes to religion, Whilst Christianity had first been introduced to Britain in Roman times and had survived on the peripheries of the island, those remaining Christian Britons had been too busy fighting the Anglo-Saxons to try to convert them. Anglo-Saxons brought their own Teutonic religion to Britain. The names Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday derive from the names of the gods of Anglo-Saxons' Teutonic religion: Tiu, the god of war; Woden, king of heaven; Thor, the god of storms; and Freya, goddess of peace. However,

by the late 6th Century, fairly peaceful Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had emerged and church leaders in Ireland and Italy saw their chance to bring back Christianity to all of Britain. In 596 Pope Gregory sent his missionary Augustine to Britain and Christianity quickly spread through the land.

3. Invasion by the Vikings

7) But not all visitors were so welcome! From the 8th century onwards, a new group of people had begun to settle and overrun Britain's east coast: the Vikings. The Vikings first raided the east of Britain in 789 and reached their greatest extent a century later. These were people from the coastal lands of Scandinavia who had struck out across Europe, Africa and Asia, with some of them even reaching North America hundreds of years before Columbus. As they could appear at any point along Britain's coast, the Anglo-Saxons struggled to defend against them.

8) Eventually, the Viking raids became so frequent that they chose to settle in Britain over the winter rather than returning to their homelands. The Anglo-Saxons eventually rallied under the leadership of King Alfred of Wessex, otherwise known as Alfred the Great, who halted the Vikings advance. His successors gradually reclaimed land from the Vikings and became kings of a single unified country, with Alfred's grandson, Athelstan, becoming the first true King of the unified England in 927 AD. (Despite this unification, Viking influence remained strong in the north,

and Viking raids resurfaced throughout the 10th century.) He was the first in a line of Anglo-Saxon kings which finally ended with the death of his descendant King Edward in 1066, which triggered William the Conqueror's invasion and the start of the next chapter in British history.

4. Legacy of the Anglo-Saxons

9) So what is the Legacy of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain? The Anglo-Saxons did not put much value in reading and writing, with most written accounts of this time coming from early Christian monks who were less than kind in their descriptions of the invaders.

10) Historians have instead had to look to other sources to gauge what happened and place names can provide clues as to where the Anglo-Saxons first settled. For example, the words "ton" and "ham" are Anglo-Saxon for village, and so we still see them today in towns and cities like Luton and Birmingham. East Anglia was named for the Angles while the Saxons gave their name to Wessex, as well as modern Essex and Sussex.

11) As well as place names, The Anglo-Saxons' biggest gift to modern Britain was its language. Early English has since evolved into modern English, and along with Chinese and Spanish, is now one of the most

important international languages in the world!