Chapter Two - the origins of England as a country

Who was the first King of all England? That's the kind of thing you'd expect *everyone* in a country to know. And yet… you will find that most English people (never mind most British people) have absolutely no idea!

By the end of this chapter you will know an important fact that maybe 99.9% of English people don't know. Amazing!

What are the origins of the English language and how did it grow to become the world's language? Again, only a few British people understand this well. It is an amazing story.

The story starts in the fifth century (from 410 AD onwards). These islands were inhabited before then by Celtic peoples. The Romans called the islands 'Britannia', and its inhabitants, the 'ancient Britons' spoke Celtic languages similar to today's Welsh. In AD 43 a large Roman army led by the Emperor Claudius landed on the South coast and turned most of the land into a Roman colony (all of today's England and some of today's Wales and Scotland).

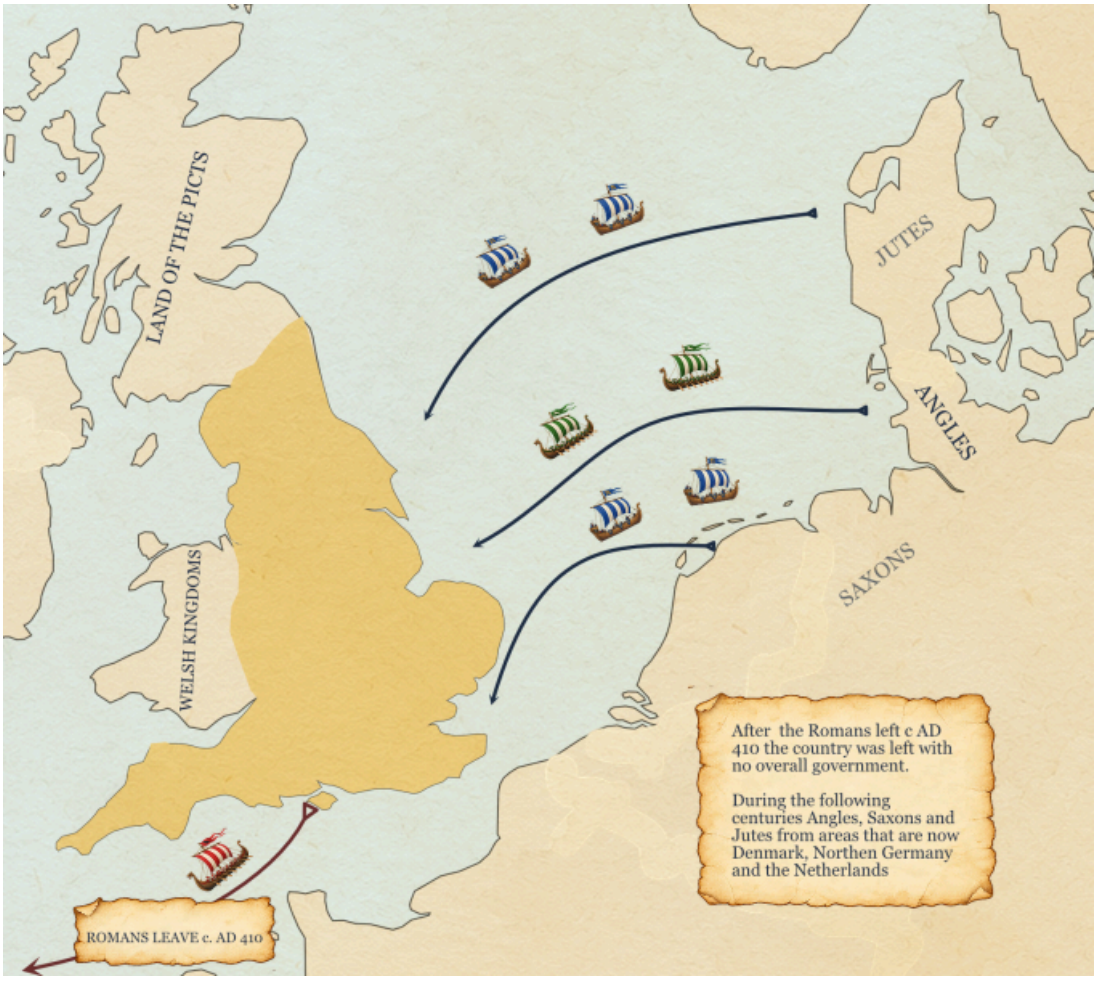
In the year 410 AD the Roman legionaries were called back to defend the parts of the empire nearer to Rome, and the land entered a time with no overall rulers.

In the following two hundred years many settlers arrived from the areas covered by Denmark, the Netherlands and Northern Germany today. Some may have been invited with the offer of good farming land in return for providing military protection from the 'Picts' from Scotland. Others were invaders, seizing the land by force.

Historians estimate that about 100 000 people crossed the North Sea to settle here. These peoples were generally called 'Angles', 'Jutes' and 'Saxons'.

The settlers all spoke similar versions of 'Old German'. They could understand each other, and in time a common language developed that became different from the Old German still spoken on the continent of Europe. This new, developing language is known as 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'Old English'.

The Celtic peoples living here before either assimilated (inter-married or became slaves to) the invaders, or fled to Cornwall, Wales or Scotland. There were an estimated one million of them. Linguists note that a surprisingly small number of Celtic words entered the English language, being mainly the names of places.



I love the English language and find the History of the Anglo-Saxons fascinating. It is part of my ancestry. But my friend who is Welsh sees this time very differently. He sees these Anglo-Saxon invaders as barbarians who destroyed a rich culture that was already here. When you study History, there is always more than one point of view!

By the time most of these settlers had arrived, the area of modern England was divided into seven main kingdoms: Northumbria, Mercia, Kent, East Anglia, Essex, Sussex and Wessex. (Four of these names remain as English counties today).

If you live in a small kingdom, you fear invasion from your neighbours. Wise rulers try to maintain peace through trade and marriage. Others seek glory through conquest.



Then in 793 AD new invaders arrived from across the seas and landed on the island of Lindisfarne, off the coast of Northumberland. They could not believe the riches they found, looked after by unarmed monks living in the monastery there. They killed many of the monks and stole as many treasures as they could take.

These new invaders from the area of Scandinavia (Sweden, Norway and Denmark) are today known as Vikings. News spread quickly of the mild climate, fertile farmland and great wealth of the Anglo-Saxon lands. More and more Vikings arrived, and one by one the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms fell to them.

By 878 AD only part of one kingdom remained: Wessex in the South West. The King of Wessex, Alfred, had to go into hiding in the marshes around Athelney in Somerset. He was safe there because the invading forces of the Danish King Guthrum could not enter the marshes safely.

For a while it looked like the Viking invasion would be a total success. If it had been, it is very likely that the emerging English language would have died out, and a version of Norse or Danish would have replaced it here.

There is a famous story about King Alfred. While hiding from the Vikings very few people knew he was the King. While staying with a family in the marshes he was asked to ‘keep an eye on’ the honey cakes that were cooking. But he was distracted by thinking of how to restore his Kingdom.

When the woman of the house returned the cakes were burned, and she grew very angry with the lazy man who could not do a simple task. Only later did she discover who he really was!




ALBA
(Later Scotland)
STRATHCLYDE
NORTHUMBRIA
Alfred's England and Danelaw
Britain c AD 886
York
THE DANELAW
WELSH KINGDOMS
Tamworth
ALFRED'S ENGLAND
London
Winchester
Exeter
CORNWALL

Alfred sent out messengers calling all the Anglo-Saxons to come and fight with him. He first waged a guerilla war against Guthrum, and then his forces destroyed Guthrum's army at the battle of Edington in May 878.

Guthrum surrendered, and then converted to Christianity with Alfred as his Godfather. They made a peace agreement under which Guthrum retreated to East Anglia. Much of the East and North of the country was under 'Danelaw', ruled by Guthrum and other Viking rulers.

Alfred ruled over the South and West: the old kingdoms of Wessex, Sussex, Kent, and much of Mercia. This area started to be known as 'Angla-land', or England.

Alfred realised that England would have to become organised if it was to resist new invasions from the Vikings. The whole country began to be divided into 'shires' which had their own courts, levied taxes and had to provide soldiers in times of war.

Later the Normans renamed the 'shires' as 'counties', though many kept 'shire' in their names (e.g. Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Worcestershire), while others dropped the 'shire' in very recent times (Somersetshire, Devonshire, Dorsetshire).

Cities built walls so they could be better defended, and Winchester became the capital city. Many years later Alfred became known as 'Alfred the Great' because of his many achievements, the greatest of which may have been his promotion of the English language. I will tell that story in the next chapter.

Alfred did so much for the country of England and the English language, though his forces were not strong enough to unify all of the old Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. That was left for his grandson, Athelstan.

On July 12, 927, Athelstan took advantage of the death of Sitric, the Viking King of York, and gathered together the leaders of the different kingdoms at Eamont Bridge, near Penrith, and persuaded them to become one country - with Athelstan as the first King of All England.

For the first time, most speakers of the growing English language now belonged to a single kingdom. Coins were produced calling him 'Rex Anglorum', Latin for 'King of England'.

To me, this was a significant moment in English History and it is strange that so few people know about it. School children learn about the Roman invasion of Britain, and the Norman invasion of 1066, but very little about the first English people and the unification of the country.

At the time of publication, the historian Tom Holland is among those campaigning for the 1,100th anniversary of Athelstan's unification of England in 927 to be

celebrated with a national holiday on 12 July 2027. Other proposals include a commemorative coin and a statue of Athelstan in Trafalgar Square. I hope the anniversary will help more people discover this remarkable king. Perhaps readers of this book will join in the celebrations!



Athelstan asked to be buried in Malmesbury Abbey, which had been founded by Abbot Aldhelm (later recognised as a saint) in 676. Since then his bones have gone missing and the statue on his tomb has been damaged several times. It does not seem a very respectful way for the English to honour their first King.



Athelstan's tomb in Malmsbury Abbey. His body went missing when the monasteries were closed in 1536, and the statue was damaged during the English Civil War between 1642 and 1649

Quiz Questions

1. Who was the first King of All England?
2. Who was the only British monarch (king or queen) to be called, 'The Great'?
3. Can you name the original 7 Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms?
4. What is the name given to the invaders from Scandinavia?

Discussion Questions

Are you surprised that most English people do not know the story of how their country became united? Why do you think this is? How can this story be shared more widely?