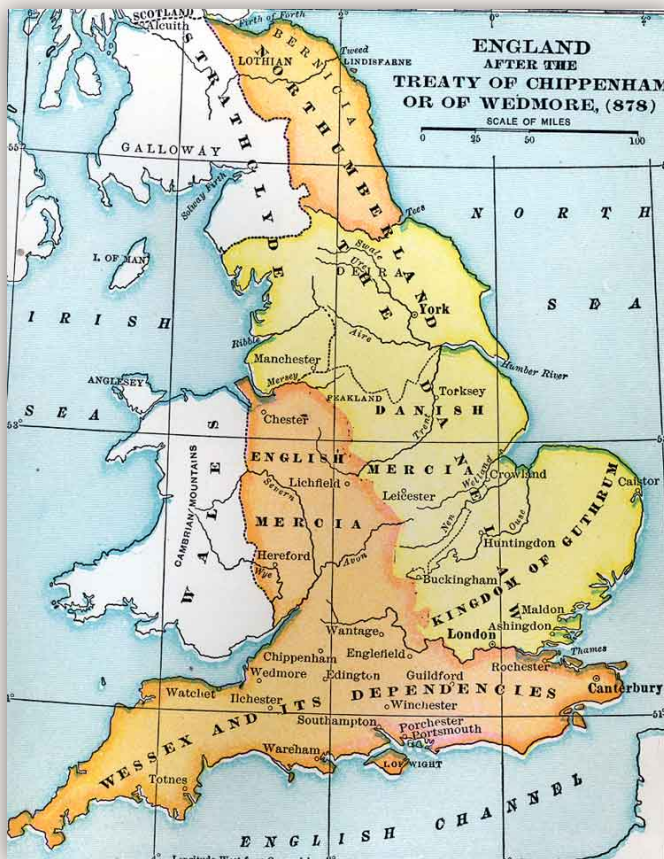


EARLY HISTORY OF BRITAIN

The Formation of England as a Single Nation

Up to the 11th century, England, Wales and Scotland were populated by a number of different peoples. There was no unified country. Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Picts, Scots, and Danes were constantly warring with each other. The Vikings had begun settling in Scotland and England in the 800's. By 877 the Vikings were well-established. The Viking Danelaw covered the area north and east of a line from the mouth of the Thames to Liverpool. Thus Leicestershire and Derbyshire was all Danish. To the northwest was the kingdom of York, another Viking stronghold, which included much of Northumbria. Below the Danelaw were the ancient Kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxons, Mercia and Wessex. Mercia stretched from the Severn to the Trent. Mercia covered the southern part of the country.

The land was torn and ravaged with on-going wars. The Church continued to suffer from the Viking pagan rites and their atrocities. Many religious communities did not recover from the killings and the resulting dispersal of their communities. Therefore, many Episcopal sees fell into ruin after they were abandoned.



It was the Anglo Saxon King Alfred, who began the process of regeneration, instituting a plan of reform continued by his children and grandchildren. This king, Alfred the Great (871-899), dreamed that St Cuthbert promised that his heirs would one day rule all England. His reforms had two main aims: to educate the general population in the practice of the Christian faith; and to restore the ideals of Benedictine monasticism. Most of the great abbeys which remained influential until the Reformation were founded or re-founded in the decades on either side of the year 1000. The same period saw the establishment of monastic chapters, a feature particular to the English Church and its followers.

After Alfred's death, his son Edward was crowned in 900, as King of the West Saxons. The Danes who, considered Edward to be weak, raided as far as Somerset, burning and pillaging, destroying much of the countryside. In retaliation, Edward overran the Danish settlements in East Anglia. He won the battle but suffered great losses and was forced to buy peace with the Danes, with silver and gold.

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Alfred's daughter, Æthelflæd was married to the Lord of the Mercians. The Mercians and Anglo-Saxons were on good terms and intermarriage amongst the nobles, and court seniors was common. Æthelflæd's mother (King Alfred's wife) was Mercian too. Æthelflæd was highly intelligent, a supreme negotiator, and rapidly became very powerful across the country. She appeared to have had the same status in her father's court as her brother Edward. She restored many cities (e.g. Chester and Gloucester in 907) –re-founding them –for military, ecclesiastic and commercial reasons. It is said that without Æthelflæd, a unified England might never have happened.

When her husband (Lord of the Mercians) died in 911, Æthelflæd was accepted as Lord of the court, in her husband's place, and became known as Lady of the Mercians. It is thought the word 'Lady' was invented to mean female Lord, because of her. She became a partner to King Edward (her younger brother) in ruling the land. They worked together to protect and strengthen Wessex and Mercia.

The key to Æthelflæd's warfare was fortress building. These were her father's (King Alfred) idea. He had built a series of Burhs –meaning fortified towns, at strategic places. The names -burgh and -borough come from this. Tamworth, (the old residence of King Offa and very important to the Mercians) was restored in 913 by Æthelflæd. It was a show of might and power to the Danes, especially important, at the very edge of Mercia, on the border with the Danelaw. Æthelflæd's chronicle describe her as coming to Tamworth with all the Thegns and Earls of the Mercian Kingdom. In that era, Tamworth was hugely important as an administrative centre for Mercia. Her rebuilding of more than a dozen boroughs (Burhs), her campaigns, her sway in court, her leadership in war and peace, represented much more than taking control. To some it was a rebirth of a Kingdom –not just a restoration of some townships.

In 917, Æthelflæd attacked the Danish base at Derby, winning an important victory against the Danelaw. The news of her triumphs were spreading throughout the Danelaw, so much so, that in 918 when her armies marched into Leicester, the Danish army submitted without a fight and chose her as their Lord! Then, from their capital in York the Northumbrians, sent word to show that they too would bow to the Mercian Lady.

In the north, her reputation far surpassed that of her brother. To the Irish, she was considered the most renowned Queen of the Saxons. Also in 918, having formed an alliance with the Scots, she defeated the Viking invaders, (who came across from Ireland and occupied the Tyne Valley) at Corbridge on Hadrian's Wall.

Æthelflæd's chronicle states that she died in June 918 in Tamworth 'eight years into her lawful rule over the Mercian Kingdom'. She is buried at Gloucester. After her death, Edward went to Tamworth to reclaim it for the Anglo-Saxons, only to find that the Mercians had appointed Æthelflæd's daughter as their ruler. This was the first time in English history that a woman succeeded the previous ruler.

Æthelstan was Edward's illegitimate son by a concubine. He was sent to be brought up by his aunt, when Edward remarried and had more children. He was virtually adopted by his aunt, Æthelflæd, who had no children of her own. He had been invested with a Saxon Sword, Jewelled Scabbard, Belt and Cloak, at the age of five, by his Grandfather King Alfred. These were the symbols of kingship (and this investiture was the forerunner of Knighthoods). A Saxon by birth, and known as Æthelflæd's foster son, Æthelstan was accepted by the Mercians.

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So, beginning with King Alfred, the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia were merged to form the Kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons. Then through Æthelflæd and Edward, it was expanded to incorporate the Danelaw of East Anglia and the Viking Midlands.

After Edward's death (923), a meeting of all the Kings in England agreed by oath that Æthelstan should be King, and not just of the Anglo-Saxons, but of all England. In 927 Æthelstan conquered the Viking Kingdom of York and drove out the Irish kinsmen who came over to reclaim it, on the death of the Viking King. Æthelstan called the kings of the Scots and the Strathclyde Welsh, the kings of Dyffed and Gwent, and the kings of northern Northumbria, to a peace conference in Cumbria in 927. The peace was agreed, as was a pact against idolatry, paving the way for a unified Christian Britain. Here he was acknowledged as the supreme King of Britain, not just parts of England. The kings of Scotland and Wales continued to reign, but under Æthelstan as overall king. England's borders—as we know them today, were defined by Æthelstan. He also established a single currency, because the growth of markets and trading across larger realms of the country, needed a unified currency to function.

Æthelstan ruled from 924-939. In 937-8 the Scots, and the Vikings in Ireland, invaded England, calling for Æthelstan to be overthrown. There resulting war was described as the most terrible ever fought. 50 years later it was called the Great War. But Æthelstan once more re-conquered these enemies and brought the country back to a single rule. The conquest by the Normans (themselves derived from the Viking settlers in northern France) did nothing to break up the unified Britain which survives to this day.

The description of early England shows Leicester, Derby and Tamworth to be extremely important for a long period in English History. King John (Magna Carta) tried to burn down Tamworth castle in the height of his disagreements with the Barons.

The Life of the Common People

Alongside all the fighting and burning, the common people of the country were trying to eke out a living. The countryside of the 9th and 10th Centuries looked very different from today. There was much open, common land, because the heaths and woods, covering much of the area, were being gradually cleared for farming, or burned in the battles. The weather was much warmer and drier than today.

Very few people lived in towns. 90% of the population lived in rural areas, which were dispersed settlements, hamlets and farmsteads rather than villages. The rural way of life was mostly subsistence farming. This hand-to-mouth existence meant severe problems when adverse conditions caused harvests to fail. English villages were only beginning to assume their current form (of a group of houses surrounding a church) in the 11th Century. Some time later, the parish –a group of settlements, came about. Village names like -bys and -thorps derive from the Vikings, as did the -shires –burgs and -boroughs.

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Up to the 9th and 10th centuries there was a good deal of land that did not belong to anyone. Large-scale strategic alliances were necessary to conquer the Vikings. So the Kings of Mercia and Lords and Lady of the Mercians gave lands to their faithful Thegns and Earls. Gradually, all the land came to be owned by someone. Following the Norman conquest in 1066, and the recording of every piece of land and property in the Domesday Book (1086), all lands were confiscated and given to the Norman Nobility. Therefore, the boundaries of estates and manors became important, and common people were necessarily associated with, and tied to, a land owner. This led to more coherent communities and the developing structures of villages and parishes. This was noticeably different from the disparate nature which had existed previously—where people were spread out, and not necessarily ‘attached’ to a village or indeed a community.

The ton, worth, burgh and borough names of villages and towns are evidence of Anglo-Saxon settlements. The bys and thorps were founded by the Scandinavian (Viking) invaders of the 9th and early 10th centuries.

