FIELD & LANDSCAPE
PRESS

BEFORE ENGLAND

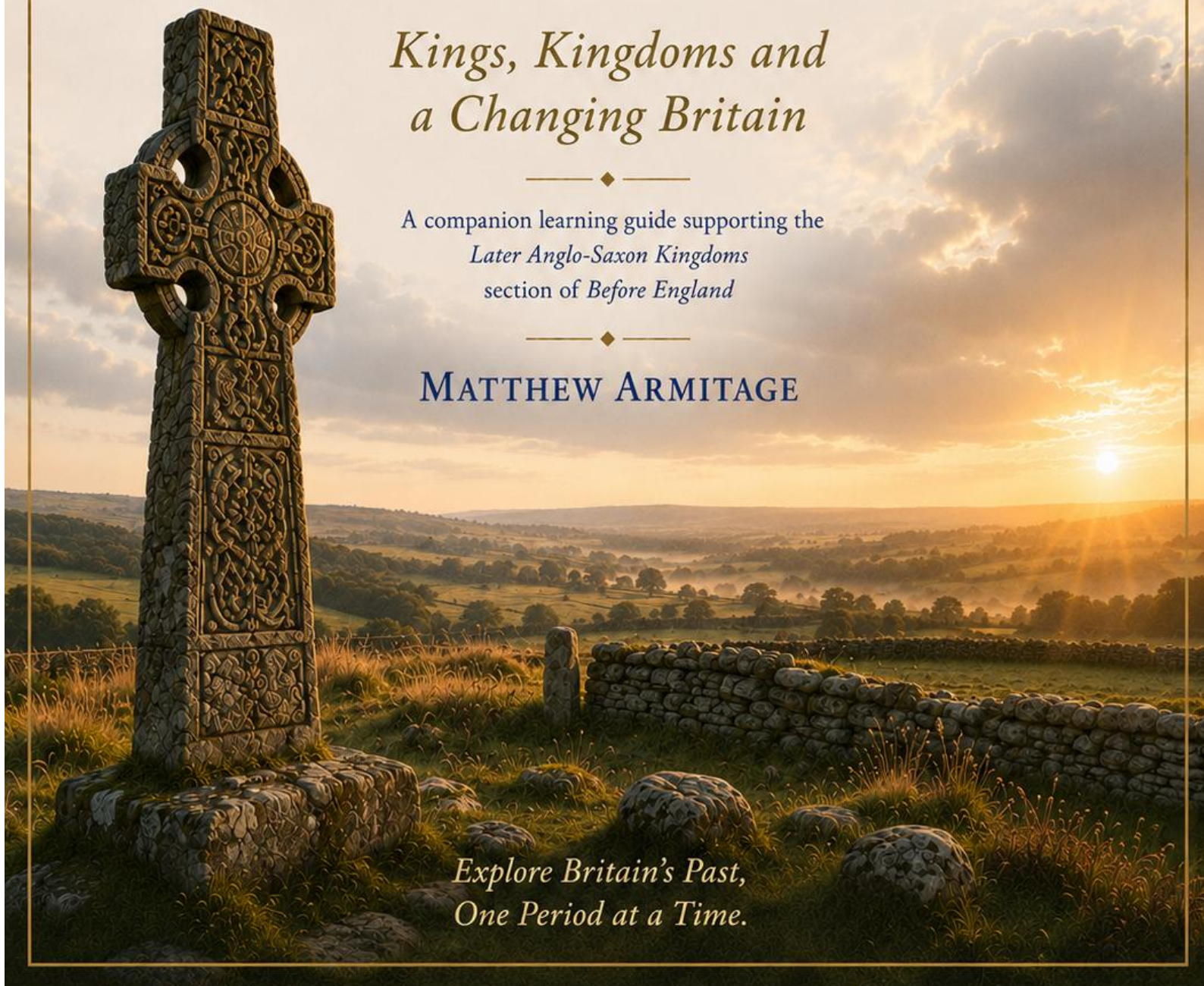
LEARNING COMPANION 10

LATER ANGLO-SAXON KINGDOMS

Kings, Kingdoms and a Changing Britain

A companion learning guide supporting the *Later Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* section of *Before England*

MATTHEW ARMITAGE



Explore Britain's Past, One Period at a Time.

Before England Learning Companion 10

Later Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms

Kings, Kingdoms and a changing Britain

Text copyright © Matthew Armitage 2026

Published by Field and Landscape Press

All rights reserved.

This Learning Companion is made available as a free educational resource to support the study of Britain's ancient past. It may be downloaded, shared and used for personal, educational and classroom purposes, provided that the text is not altered, sold or reproduced commercially without written permission from the author.

Matthew Armitage has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this work.

Part of the Before England Learning Companion series.

www.matthewarmitage.co.uk

Contents

BEFORE ENGLAND LEARNING COMPANION 10 4

Period at a Glance 5

What Were the Later Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms? 7

Who Were the Later Anglo-Saxons? 8

How Do We Know? 9

Main Discoveries 11

Climate and Environment 13

Everyday Life 14

Technology and Innovation 15

People and Society 16

Beliefs and Religion 17

Glossary 19

Suggested Reading 20

Places to Visit 20

About the Author 21

About Before England 21

BEFORE ENGLAND LEARNING COMPANION 10

Welcome to the Tenth Volume in the *Before England Learning Companion* Series

Each Learning Companion explores the archaeological evidence behind one period of Britain's past. Rather than presenting a complete history, these guides explain how archaeologists reconstruct ancient lives through discoveries, scientific investigation and the evidence preserved in the landscape.

Later Anglo-Saxon Britain spans approximately CE 650 to CE 866, a period during which England changed from a collection of regional kingdoms into an increasingly organised and prosperous society. Powerful kings ruled larger territories, Christianity became firmly established, monasteries developed into centres of learning and trade connected England with communities across Europe. By the end of this period, many of the foundations of medieval England had been laid.

This was an age of remarkable achievement. Great royal centres governed expanding kingdoms, craftsmen produced some of the finest metalwork ever made in Britain, and new trading towns brought wealth from across the North Sea. Kings issued law codes, minted coins and built impressive earthworks such as Offa's Dyke to mark and defend their frontiers. England was becoming wealthier, more organised and increasingly connected to the wider world.

Unlike earlier prehistoric periods, the Later Anglo-Saxon age is illuminated not only by archaeology but also by written history. Monks and scholars recorded the lives of kings, the spread of Christianity and important political events. Writers such as Bede provide valuable contemporary accounts, while archaeology allows historians to compare these records with the evidence uncovered from excavations. Together they create one of the richest pictures of life before the Norman Conquest.

Archaeological discoveries continue to transform our understanding of this remarkable period. Excavations at royal centres such as Yeavering, trading settlements including Hamwic and Ipswich, monasteries such as Lyminge, and discoveries like the Staffordshire Hoard reveal a society of skilled craftsmen, merchants, farmers, monks and rulers. Scientific techniques, landscape archaeology and historical research continue to refine our knowledge of how the English kingdoms developed before the arrival of the Vikings.

This companion introduces the principal archaeological discoveries, important sites and historical evidence that allow us to explore Later Anglo-Saxon Britain and understand how the English kingdoms emerged as one of the most influential societies in early medieval Europe.



Anglo-Saxon brooch. Portable Antiquities Scheme (Find ID: 460435). The Trustees of the British Museum. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Period at a Glance

Dates: CE 650–866

Who lived in England?
Anglo-Saxon farmers, craftsmen, merchants, monks, nobles, kings and queens, together with growing communities living in villages, monasteries and the first trading towns.

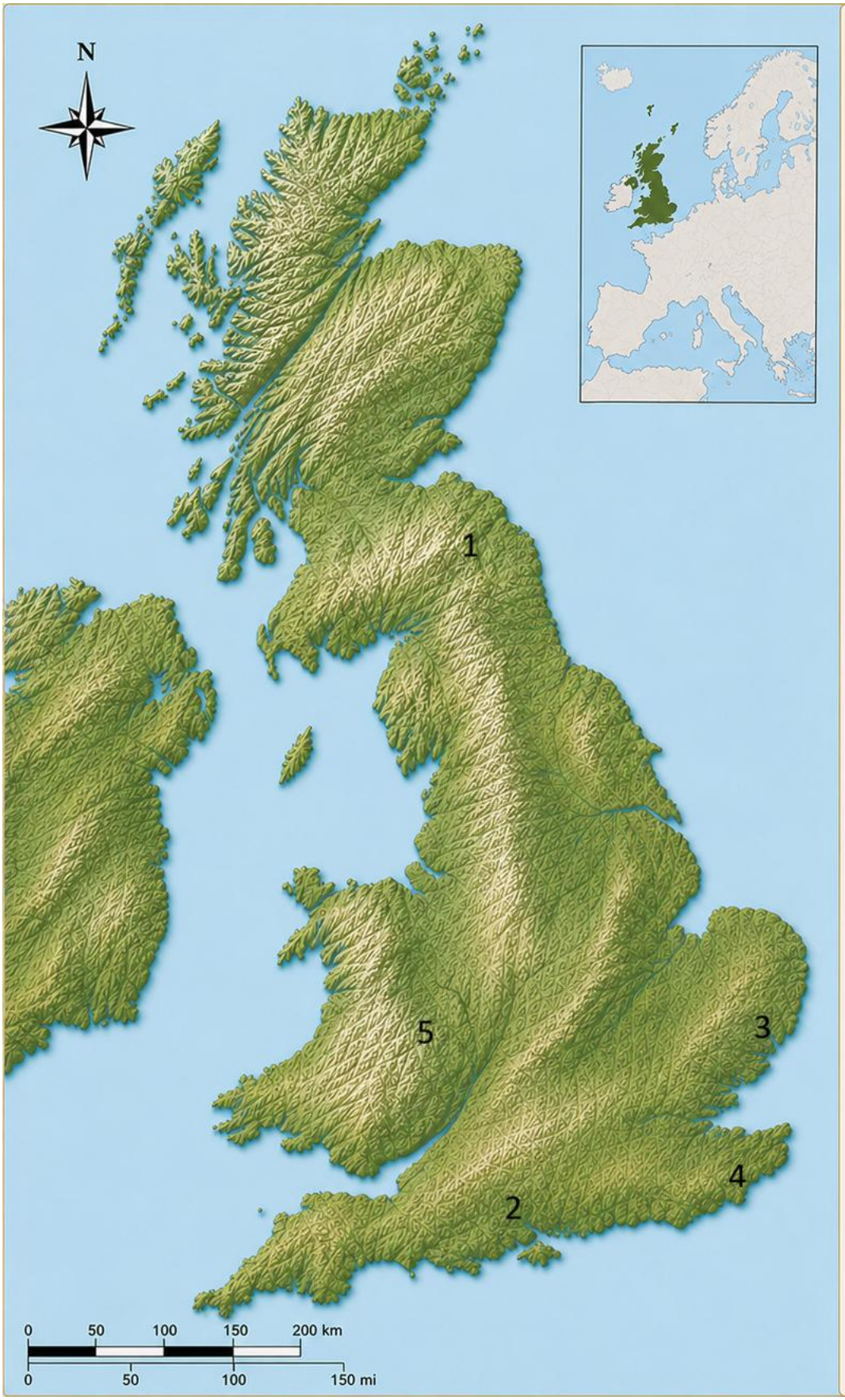
How people lived
Most people still lived in farming communities, growing crops and raising livestock. At the same time, permanent towns expanded, trade flourished and kingdoms became more organised. Monasteries developed into centres of learning, while skilled craftsmen produced objects that reflected the growing wealth and sophistication of Anglo-Saxon England.

Important developments

- Christianity becomes firmly established throughout the English kingdoms.
- Powerful kingdoms such as Mercia, Northumbria and Wessex dominate England.
- Royal centres develop into important places of government and administration.
- Trading settlements, known as wics, grow into England's first commercial towns.
- Kings issue law codes and mint coins to strengthen royal authority.
- Great monuments, including Offa's Dyke, are constructed to mark political frontiers.
- England becomes closely connected to Europe through trade, diplomacy and religion.
- The period ends shortly before the arrival of the Great Heathen Army in CE 866, marking the beginning of the Viking Age.

What archaeologists find
Royal halls, monasteries, churches, trading settlements, workshops, coins, jewellery, weapons, pottery, imported goods, manuscripts, carved stone crosses, earthworks, environmental evidence and spectacular treasures such as the Staffordshire Hoard.

Why this period matters
The Later Anglo-Saxon period saw the emergence of England as an organised kingdom. During these centuries, government became more sophisticated, Christianity shaped everyday life, towns reappeared after the Roman period and international trade flourished. Archaeology and written history together reveal how the foundations of medieval England were laid long before the Norman Conquest.



Research Companion 9

Later Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms

Key Sites in Britain

1 Yeavering (Ad Gefrin), Northumberland

Major royal centre with timber halls, craft areas and rich finds.

2 Hamwic (Southampton)

Early trading town with workshops, storehouses and imported goods.

3 Ipswich (Gipeswic), Suffolk

Key trading centre with pottery kilns, workshops and evidence of town life.

4 Lyminge, Kent

Royal settlement with church, workshops and imported artefacts.

5 Offa's Dyke

Great earthwork marking the border of King Offa's kingdom.

What Were the Later Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms?

The Later Anglo-Saxon period, spanning approximately CE 650 to 866, was an age of growing kingdoms, expanding trade and increasing political power. During these two centuries, England changed from a collection of regional kingdoms into a more organised and connected society. Powerful rulers governed larger territories, Christianity became firmly established, towns began to grow once again and many of the institutions that shaped medieval England first emerged.

The kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia, Wessex, Kent and East Anglia competed for influence, sometimes through warfare and sometimes through diplomacy and marriage. No single kingdom dominated throughout the period. During the seventh century Northumbria was one of the most powerful kingdoms, producing renowned centres of learning such as Wearmouth and Jarrow. In the eighth century Mercia rose to prominence under rulers including King Offa, while by the ninth century Wessex was becoming an increasingly important political force.

Kings exercised far greater authority than their predecessors. They ruled from royal estates and great timber halls, issued written law codes, collected taxes and rewarded loyal followers with land and wealth. Royal assemblies brought together nobles, church leaders and advisers to discuss important matters of government, helping to create increasingly sophisticated systems of administration.

Christianity transformed society during these centuries. Monasteries became centres of worship, education and scholarship, where monks copied manuscripts, recorded history and preserved learning. Churches were established across the countryside, and Christianity became closely linked with royal authority. Kings supported monasteries not only for religious reasons but also because they helped strengthen government, literacy and communication throughout their kingdoms.

Trade also expanded dramatically. New trading settlements, known as wics, developed along rivers and coastlines, linking England with Europe through commerce. Merchants imported glass, pottery, wine, quern stones and luxury goods, while English wool, cloth, metalwork and agricultural products were exported overseas. Archaeological discoveries from places such as Hamwic and Ipswich reveal thriving commercial communities that marked the return of urban life after the end of Roman Britain.

The Later Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were not simply the final stage before the Vikings arrived. They were a period of remarkable creativity and development, during which government, religion, trade and culture flourished. Archaeology and written history together show how these centuries laid the foundations of the English kingdom that would continue to evolve through the Viking Age and beyond.



Late Anglo-Saxon coin. Portable Antiquities Scheme (Find ID: 605211). The Trustees of the British Museum. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Who Were the Later Anglo-Saxons?

The people who lived in England during the Later Anglo-Saxon period were descendants of the communities that had settled in Britain during the fifth and sixth centuries. By CE 650, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes had become less important as separate groups, and people increasingly identified with the kingdoms in which they lived, such as Mercia, Northumbria, Wessex, Kent or East Anglia. Although these kingdoms often competed for power, they shared a common language, many cultural traditions and the Christian faith.

Most people were farmers who lived in small villages scattered across the countryside. Their lives revolved around the farming year, with the changing seasons determining when crops were planted and harvested and when livestock required attention. Mixed farming provided food, clothing and raw materials, while woodland and rivers supplied many of the resources needed for everyday life and long-distance travel.

Society became increasingly organised. Kings ruled with the support of nobles, church leaders and local officials who helped administer the kingdom and collect taxes. Written law codes set out punishments for crimes, protected property and established responsibilities within society. Although power rested with the king, government depended upon cooperation between local communities, the Church and regional leaders.

Craftsmanship reached an exceptionally high standard during this period. Skilled craftsmen produced everything from everyday tools to finely decorated objects for the Church and the royal courts. Scribes and artists also created beautifully illuminated manuscripts that remain among the finest works of early medieval Europe. Archaeological discoveries such as the Staffordshire Hoard demonstrate the remarkable skill of Anglo-Saxon craftsmen and the wealth of the kingdoms they served.

Trade connected England with communities across northern Europe. Merchants exchanged English goods for imports that helped strengthen the growing kingdoms and brought new ideas into the country. Trading settlements such as Hamwic, Ipswich and London became busy centres where merchants, craftsmen and travellers met to exchange both goods and ideas.

By the ninth century, the Later Anglo-Saxons had created a society that was far more organised than that of earlier generations. Their kingdoms possessed written laws, established churches, thriving markets, skilled craftsmen and growing towns. These achievements laid the foundations of medieval England and provided the society that would soon face one of its greatest challenges- the arrival of the Vikings.

How Do We Know?

The Later Anglo-Saxon period is one of the best understood periods before the Norman Conquest because it is illuminated by both archaeology and contemporary written records. Excavations of royal centres, monasteries, towns and villages provide remarkable evidence for everyday life, while chronicles, charters, law codes and religious writings help place these discoveries within their historical context. By combining these different sources of evidence, archaeologists and historians can build a detailed picture of England between CE 650 and 866.

Some of the most important discoveries come from royal centres such as Yeavering in Northumberland. Excavations have revealed great timber halls, assembly places and ceremonial buildings that demonstrate how Anglo-Saxon kings governed their kingdoms before permanent capitals developed. These sites show that royal authority depended not only on military strength but also on hospitality, ceremony and public gatherings that reinforced loyalty and political power.

Excavations at the trading settlements of Hamwic (Southampton) and Ipswich reveal another side of Anglo-Saxon life. Archaeologists have uncovered streets, workshops, houses, imported pottery, glass, metalworking debris and thousands of everyday objects. These discoveries demonstrate that England had once again become a nation of merchants and craftsmen, with towns linked to trading networks stretching across the North Sea and into continental Europe.

Scientific techniques continue to improve our understanding of this period. Radiocarbon dating establishes the age of buildings and objects, while environmental archaeology uses pollen, seeds, charcoal and animal bones to reconstruct the countryside and farming practices. The study of coins, known as numismatics, helps archaeologists trace trade, royal authority and economic development, while place-name evidence and landscape archaeology reveal how settlements and boundaries changed over time.

Written sources provide valuable evidence, but they must always be interpreted carefully. The writings of Bede, together with surviving law codes, charters and other contemporary documents, record important people and events from the period. However, these texts were written for particular audiences and often reflect religious or political viewpoints. Archaeology allows historians to compare these accounts with the physical evidence, confirming, refining and sometimes challenging what the written sources describe.

By combining excavation, scientific analysis and documentary evidence, archaeologists have built an increasingly detailed understanding of the Later Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Every excavation, whether of a royal hall, monastery, trading settlement or ordinary village, adds another piece to the story of how England developed during the centuries before the Viking Age.

Timeline
CE 650

CE 650

The English kingdoms grow stronger

By the middle of the seventh century, kingdoms such as Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex have become powerful political states. Christianity is firmly established, and kings exercise increasing authority over their territories.

CE 664

The Synod of Whitby

Church leaders meet at Whitby to decide whether the English Church should follow Roman or Irish Christian traditions. The decision to follow Roman practice strengthens links with continental Europe.

Late seventh century (c. CE 670–700)

The first trading towns develop

Permanent trading settlements, known as wics, are established at places such as Hamwic (Southampton) and Ipswich. These become centres of trade, craft production and international commerce.

Early eighth century (c. CE 700–735)

Bede writes the Ecclesiastical History

The monk Bede completes one of the most important historical works ever written in Britain, recording the history of the English Church and the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

CE 757–796

The reign of King Offa of Mercia

Offa makes Mercia the most powerful kingdom in England. He issues coins, strengthens royal government and orders the construction of Offa's Dyke along the Welsh border.

Late eighth century (c. CE 780s)

Offa's Dyke is completed

One of Britain's greatest early medieval engineering projects marks much of the frontier between Mercia and the Welsh kingdoms.

CE 793

The raid on Lindisfarne

Viking raiders attack the monastery at Lindisfarne. Although small raids had probably occurred before, this event is traditionally seen as the beginning of the Viking Age in Britain.

Early ninth century (c. CE 800–850)

Trade and towns continue to grow

England's trading settlements expand, coinage becomes more widespread and commerce links the English kingdoms with Europe and Scandinavia.

CE 866

The Great Heathen Army arrives

A large Viking army lands in England, beginning a new phase of conflict that would transform the history of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and mark the end of the Later Anglo-Saxon period.

This timeline highlights the major political, religious and economic developments that transformed England between CE 650 and 866, showing how powerful kingdoms, Christianity and international trade laid the foundations of medieval England before the arrival of the Vikings.

Main Discoveries

The Later Anglo-Saxon period has produced some of the richest archaeological discoveries in Britain. Royal palaces, monasteries, trading towns, great earthworks and spectacular treasures reveal a society that was becoming wealthier, more organised and increasingly connected with the rest of Europe. Together, these sites help archaeologists understand how the English kingdoms developed during the centuries before the Viking Age.

Yeavering (Ad Gefrin), Northumberland

Yeavering was one of the most important royal centres of the early Northumbrian kings. Excavations uncovered enormous timber halls, assembly areas, grand entrances and ceremonial spaces where kings governed, received visitors and held important gatherings. The site provides remarkable evidence for how royal power was exercised before permanent capitals developed.

Evidence found: Great timber halls, assembly structures, postholes, boundary fences, animal bones, domestic artefacts and evidence of royal ceremonies.

Hamwic (Southampton)

Hamwic was one of England's earliest planned trading towns. Excavations have revealed streets, workshops, houses, storehouses and industrial areas, together with thousands of imported objects. The settlement demonstrates how trade transformed England during the eighth century and re-established urban life after the Roman period.

Evidence found: Streets, timber buildings, workshops, imported pottery, glass, metalworking debris, coins, quern stones and evidence of international trade.

Ipswich (Gipeswic), Suffolk

Ipswich developed into one of the most important commercial centres in Anglo-Saxon England. Archaeologists have uncovered pottery kilns, industrial workshops, houses and imported goods that illustrate the growth of manufacturing and overseas commerce. It became one of the first permanent towns established after Roman Britain.

Evidence found: Pottery kilns, workshops, imported goods, timber buildings, streets, coins, tools and evidence of organised town planning.

Lyminge, Kent

Lyminge provides one of the finest examples of an Anglo-Saxon monastery developing within an existing royal settlement. Excavations have uncovered churches, domestic buildings, workshops and evidence for farming, demonstrating that monasteries were centres of religion, education, administration and economic activity.

Evidence found: Church remains, monastic buildings, royal halls, pottery, metalwork, animal bones, environmental evidence and imported artefacts.

Offa's Dyke

Stretching for over 130 kilometres (80 miles) along much of the modern border between England and Wales, Offa's Dyke is one of Britain's greatest engineering achievements. Constructed during the reign of King Offa of Mercia, it marked political boundaries, controlled movement and demonstrated the power of one of England's strongest kingdoms.

Evidence found: Massive earthworks, banks, ditches, landscape boundaries and evidence of large-scale organised construction.

Staffordshire Hoard

Discovered in 2009, the Staffordshire Hoard is the largest collection of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver metalwork ever found. Most of the objects come from richly decorated weapons and military equipment, revealing the extraordinary craftsmanship, wealth and power of the Mercian elite during the eighth century.

Evidence found: Gold sword fittings, helmet fragments, crosses, garnet jewellery, silver mounts, military equipment and exquisite decorative metalwork.

Why These Sites Matter

Each of these discoveries reveals a different aspect of Later Anglo-Saxon England. Yeavering demonstrates how kings ruled their kingdoms, while Hamwic and Ipswich show the growth of towns and international trade. Lyminge illustrates the importance of Christianity and monastic life, Offa's Dyke reflects the growing strength of royal government, and the Staffordshire Hoard displays the remarkable skill of Anglo-Saxon craftsmen and the wealth of the ruling elite.

Together, these sites reveal a society that had become politically organised, economically prosperous and culturally sophisticated. They show how the English kingdoms developed into powerful states long before the Norman Conquest and provide some of the finest archaeological evidence for the emergence of medieval England.

Climate and Environment

The climate of Later Anglo-Saxon England was much like that of today, with mild summers, cool winters and rainfall that supported farming across much of the country. By the seventh century, the landscape had already been shaped by thousands of years of human activity. Ancient woodlands had been cleared to create fields and pasture, while villages, roads, monasteries and royal estates became increasingly common features of the countryside. England was no longer a wilderness but a carefully managed agricultural landscape.

Most people lived in small farming communities surrounded by cultivated land and woodland. Mixed farming remained the foundation of the economy, and successful harvests were essential for survival. Throughout the year, the changing seasons continued to shape the rhythm of everyday life.

Woodland remained one of England's most valuable natural resources. Woodland provided the timber needed for building, repairing and heating homes, while also supplying many of the raw materials required for everyday life. Forests also supported hunting and provided wild foods such as berries, nuts and mushrooms. Pigs were often driven into woodland during the autumn to feed on acorns and beech mast, helping communities make full use of the landscape.

Rivers were vital to life in Later Anglo-Saxon England. They supplied fresh water, supported fishing and provided the fastest means of travel. Major rivers such as the Thames, Trent, Severn and Humber linked inland settlements with coastal trading towns, allowing merchants to transport goods across the country and overseas. Many of England's earliest towns developed beside navigable rivers, where trade could flourish and royal authority could be more easily maintained.

Environmental archaeology has revealed much about these changing landscapes. Pollen preserved in ancient sediments shows how woodland gradually gave way to farmland, while seeds, charcoal and animal bones recovered from archaeological excavations provide evidence of crops, livestock and woodland management. Together, these discoveries demonstrate that Later Anglo-Saxon England supported an increasingly productive countryside capable of sustaining growing towns, monasteries and powerful kingdoms.

By the ninth century, England had become a landscape of cultivated fields, thriving settlements and busy waterways. The careful management of land and natural resources helped support a prosperous society whose wealth, organisation and productivity laid the foundations of medieval England.

Did You Know?

Many of England's ancient field boundaries and parish boundaries follow routes that were first established during the Anglo-Saxon period. In some parts of the country, the pattern of fields and lanes visible today still reflects decisions made more than 1,200 years ago.

Everyday Life

Although kings, monasteries and great treasures often dominate the history of the Later Anglo-Saxon period, the lives of most people were centred on farming, family and their local community. The vast majority lived in small villages where daily life followed the changing seasons. Success depended upon hard work, cooperation and making the best use of the land.

Most families lived in timber houses with thatched roofs, surrounded by fields, gardens and animal pens. Villages often included a church, a mill or a meeting place, while larger settlements contained workshops, markets and the homes of local landowners. Throughout the year, people ploughed fields, sowed crops, harvested grain and cared for livestock. Every member of the household played a part in keeping the community running.

Food remained simple but varied. Most meals were based on cereals grown locally, supplemented by vegetables, fruit and foods gathered from the surrounding countryside. Meat was eaten less often than bread or porridge, although fish became especially important during religious fast days.

Craftwork became increasingly specialised during this period. Skilled craftsmen supplied the tools, equipment and fine objects needed across society. Their work supported both everyday life and the growing prosperity of the English kingdoms, while specialist craftsmen produced luxury goods for wealthy patrons and the Church. Weaving remained one of the most important household industries, producing cloth for clothing, blankets and sails.

Markets became an increasingly familiar feature of everyday life. Farmers travelled to nearby towns to sell surplus grain, livestock, wool and dairy produce, while merchants offered imported goods such as pottery, glassware, wine and fine textiles from continental Europe. Growing trade connected even small rural communities to wider economic networks.

Religion shaped the rhythm of everyday life. Church festivals, saints' days and the Christian calendar influenced the working year, while baptisms, marriages and funerals brought communities together. Monasteries provided education, cared for travellers and the sick, and acted as centres of learning.

Archaeological excavations of villages, farms and towns reveal that Later Anglo-Saxon England combined traditional farming with growing prosperity, skilled craftsmanship and expanding trade. While ordinary people remained closely tied to the land, they were also becoming part of a kingdom that was increasingly organised, connected and prosperous.

Did You Know?

By the eighth century, many Anglo-Saxon towns had regular markets where people could buy goods from across Europe. Excavations at places such as Hamwic and Ipswich have uncovered imported pottery, glass and other everyday objects, showing that even ordinary communities were connected to international trade.

Technology and Innovation

The Later Anglo-Saxon period was an age of remarkable technological and artistic achievement. Although England remained a largely agricultural society, its craftsmen, builders and engineers developed increasingly sophisticated skills that transformed everyday life. Advances in metalworking, construction, transport, manuscript production and coin-making helped create a society that was wealthier, better organised and more closely connected with the rest of Europe.

Building techniques continued to improve throughout the period. Skilled carpenters constructed large timber halls, churches, bridges and houses using carefully shaped oak beams joined with remarkable precision. Stone buildings also became more common, particularly for churches and monasteries, reflecting the growing influence of Christianity and the permanence of important settlements. Some churches were built using stone recycled from abandoned Roman buildings, linking England's past with its future.

Metalworking reached an exceptionally high standard. Blacksmiths produced the tools needed for everyday life, while specialist goldsmiths created richly decorated objects that demonstrated remarkable technical skill and artistic achievement. The Staffordshire Hoard demonstrates the extraordinary craftsmanship achieved during this period, with decorated sword fittings and military equipment revealing techniques that required years of training and experience.

Coinage became increasingly important. English kings issued silver pennies bearing their names and symbols of royal authority. These coins made trade easier, encouraged economic growth and reinforced the power of the monarchy. Archaeologists use coin discoveries to trace trade routes, identify centres of royal authority and date archaeological sites.

Transport also improved. Rivers remained England's principal highways, while Anglo-Saxon shipbuilders constructed sturdy vessels capable of carrying people and goods across rivers, along the coast and over the North Sea. Roman roads continued to be used where they survived, while new routes linked royal centres, monasteries and growing towns.

One of the greatest innovations of the period was the spread of literacy. Monasteries became centres of learning where monks copied books by hand onto parchment using decorated lettering and colourful illustrations. Works such as the Lindisfarne Gospels demonstrate advances in writing, book production and education, preserving religious texts, historical records and classical knowledge for future generations.

The archaeological evidence reveals a society that combined practical innovation with exceptional artistic skill. Whether constructing Offa's Dyke, producing finely crafted metalwork or creating illuminated manuscripts of international importance, the people of Later Anglo-Saxon England demonstrated creativity and technical expertise that laid the foundations for the medieval world.

Did You Know?

Every Anglo-Saxon silver penny was struck individually by hand using engraved dies and a hammer. Because each coin was made separately, no two are exactly alike, making them invaluable to archaeologists studying England's economy, trade and royal government.

People and Society

Later Anglo-Saxon society was carefully organised, with each person holding a recognised place within their community. Although most people were farmers, society included kings, nobles, priests, craftsmen, merchants and labourers, all of whom contributed to the growing strength of the English kingdoms. During these centuries, government became more structured, laws were written down and communities became increasingly connected to royal authority.

At the top of society stood the king. He was expected to lead his people in war, maintain peace, administer justice and protect the Church. Kings ruled with the support of ealdormen, bishops and royal advisers. Rather than governing from a single capital, kings moved between royal estates, holding assemblies, settling disputes and reinforcing their authority.

Below the nobility were the ceorls, or free people, who made up most of the population. They farmed their own land, kept livestock and supported their families through hard work. Many also owed military service or labour to their local lord. Their rights and responsibilities were protected by law, although wealthier landowners generally enjoyed greater influence.

Not everyone was free. Some people were slaves, captured during warfare, born into slavery or forced into servitude through debt or poverty. They worked in households, on farms and in workshops, carrying out many of the hardest tasks. Although slavery was accepted during the Anglo-Saxon period, the Church sometimes encouraged the freeing of slaves.

Women played an essential role in family and community life. They managed households, prepared food, cared for children, supervised servants and were often responsible for spinning, weaving and making clothing. Some women owned land, managed estates and exercised considerable influence, particularly within noble families. Queens and abbesses could become important political and religious figures.

The Church occupied an increasingly important position within society. Bishops, priests and monks were respected for their religious duties, education and administrative skills. Monasteries became centres of learning, healthcare and hospitality, preserving books and advising kings and nobles. Literacy gave churchmen an important role in government and record-keeping.

Archaeology shows that society was becoming increasingly prosperous and interconnected. Excavations reveal farming families living alongside skilled craftsmen, while trading towns demonstrate the growing importance of merchants and overseas commerce. Rich burials, decorated metalwork and large royal halls reflect the wealth of the ruling elite, while everyday objects remind us that the kingdoms depended upon ordinary people.

The Later Anglo-Saxon period was a time of growing social organisation. Kings, nobles, church leaders and farming communities each played their part in creating a stable and prosperous society that laid the foundations of medieval England.

Did You Know?

The Old English word "ceorl" originally meant a free farmer. Over time, the word changed in pronunciation and eventually became the modern English name "churl." Today it has a very different meaning, but its origins lie in the ordinary men and women who formed the backbone of Anglo-Saxon society.

Beliefs and Religion

By the Later Anglo-Saxon period, Christianity had become the dominant religion throughout the English kingdoms. Although memories of earlier pagan beliefs survived in folklore, place names and traditions, churches and monasteries stood at the heart of many communities. Religion influenced every aspect of life, from the laws issued by kings to education, written records and the celebration of festivals.

The Church was far more than a place of worship. Monasteries became important centres of learning and religious life. Monks and nuns preserved knowledge through writing, educated future generations and cared for both local communities and travellers. Many monasteries also managed extensive estates and played a significant role in the economy. Some monasteries became wealthy institutions supported by kings and nobles, strengthening both royal government and the Christian faith.

Many of England's greatest scholars lived during this period. The monk Bede, writing at the monastery of Jarrow in the early eighth century, produced The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, one of the most important historical works written in Britain. His writings provide invaluable information about the early English kingdoms, although archaeologists continue to compare his accounts with archaeological evidence.

Churches also became centres of community life. The parish church brought communities together throughout the year for worship and important events in people's lives, while the Christian calendar shaped the year through feast days, festivals and periods of fasting. Priests provided spiritual guidance, settled disputes and often advised local rulers. As literacy spread through the Church, written documents such as charters, wills and law codes became increasingly common.

Religious art flourished during these centuries. Stone crosses decorated with intricate carvings were erected across the countryside, while churches were furnished with finely worked metal objects, carved stone sculpture and illuminated manuscripts. The Lindisfarne Gospels, produced around CE 700, remain among the finest examples of medieval book art in Europe.

Archaeology continues to deepen our understanding of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. Excavations at monasteries such as Lyminge, Jarrow and Wearmouth have uncovered churches, workshops, cemeteries and everyday objects that reveal how religious communities lived and worked. Carved stone crosses, grave markers and the remains of early churches provide further evidence of how Christianity transformed the landscape and people's lives.

By the ninth century, Christianity had become firmly woven into English society. It influenced government, education, art, law and everyday life, helping to unite the English kingdoms through shared beliefs and learning. The monasteries and churches established during this period preserved knowledge, encouraged scholarship and shaped English culture for centuries to come.

Did You Know?

The word "minster", found in many English place names such as Westminster and Leominster, comes from the Old English mynster, meaning a monastery or important church. These places were often centres of worship, learning and royal influence more than 1,200 years ago.

Why the Later Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms Matter

The Later Anglo-Saxon period was one of the most important chapters in the story of England. During these two centuries, the foundations of a united English kingdom began to emerge through stronger government, expanding trade, widespread Christianity and the growth of towns. Many of the institutions that shaped medieval England-and continue to influence Britain today-can be traced back to this remarkable period.

The English kingdoms became more organised than ever before. Kings ruled larger territories, issued written laws, collected taxes and developed systems of government that reached into towns and villages across the country. Royal authority was no longer based solely on personal leadership or military strength. Increasingly, it depended upon administration, justice and cooperation between the Crown, the Church and local communities.

The growth of Christianity transformed both society and culture. Churches and monasteries became centres of worship, learning and literacy, preserving knowledge that might otherwise have been lost. Monks copied books, educated future leaders and recorded the history of their own age, leaving behind written accounts that, when combined with archaeological discoveries, provide one of the clearest pictures of life before the Norman Conquest.

Trade also changed England forever. The emergence of towns such as Hamwic, Ipswich and London marked the return of urban life after the end of Roman Britain. Merchants connected England with markets across Europe, bringing wealth, new ideas and valuable goods into the kingdom. These trading networks encouraged economic growth and helped establish towns that would continue to flourish throughout the medieval period.

Archaeology has transformed our understanding of these centuries. Discoveries such as Yeavering, Offa's Dyke and the Staffordshire Hoard reveal that the Later Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were capable of extraordinary organisation, engineering and artistic achievement. Scientific techniques, including environmental archaeology, landscape analysis and the study of coins, continue to provide new evidence about how people lived, traded and governed their kingdoms.

Perhaps most importantly, the Later Anglo-Saxon period reminds us that England was not created by a single battle or one great king. It emerged gradually through generations of farmers, merchants, monks, craftsmen, rulers and ordinary families whose work shaped the landscape and institutions of the country. By the time Viking armies arrived in the ninth century, England had already become a sophisticated and prosperous society with a strong cultural identity and growing political unity.

The story of the Later Anglo-Saxon kingdoms is therefore not simply one of kings and battles. It is the story of how a collection of regional kingdoms developed into the foundations of the English nation-a transformation whose influence can still be seen in our towns, landscapes, language and institutions today.

Did You Know?

Many of the shire counties of England, such as Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Warwickshire, were organised during the Anglo-Saxon period. The word "shire" comes from the Old English scīr, meaning an administrative district, and many of these boundaries have survived for more than a thousand years.

Glossary

Abbey – A large monastery or convent led by an abbot or abbess.

Assembly – A meeting where kings, nobles and church leaders discussed laws, settled disputes and made important decisions.

Bede – An Anglo-Saxon monk and scholar whose *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is one of the most important written sources for early English history.

Ceorl – A free person, usually a farmer, who formed the majority of the Anglo-Saxon population.

Charter – A written document recording the grant of land or special rights.

Coinage – The coins issued by kings for trade and as symbols of royal authority.

Ealdorman – A powerful noble appointed by the king to govern part of a kingdom.

Excavation – The careful archaeological investigation of a site by digging, recording and analysing the evidence.

Hamwic – An important Anglo-Saxon trading settlement beneath modern Southampton, one of England's earliest commercial towns.

Kingdom – A territory ruled by a king. During this period the most powerful kingdoms included Mercia, Northumbria and Wessex.

Lyminge – An important Anglo-Saxon monastery and royal settlement in Kent that has provided valuable archaeological evidence.

Monastery – A religious community where monks or nuns lived, worshipped, studied and worked.

Numismatics – The study of coins and currency, used by archaeologists to understand trade, dating and royal authority.

Offa's Dyke – A massive earthwork built during the reign of King Offa of Mercia, marking much of the frontier between England and Wales.

Royal Centre – A place where Anglo-Saxon kings lived, governed and held important assemblies.

Staffordshire Hoard – The largest collection of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver metalwork ever discovered, found in Staffordshire in 2009.

Synod – A formal meeting of church leaders to discuss matters of religion and Church organisation.

Wic – An early Anglo-Saxon trading settlement, often located beside a river or coast.

Yeavering (Ad Gefrin) – One of the best-preserved Anglo-Saxon royal centres, revealing how early kings governed their kingdoms.

Suggested Reading

Blair, J. Building Anglo-Saxon England.

Foot, S. Æthelstan: The First King of England.

Gannon, A. The Iconography of Early Anglo-Saxon Coinage.

Higham, N. J. and Ryan, M. J. *The Anglo-Saxons*.

Loyn, H. R. Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest.

Pestell, T. The Kingdom of East Anglia.

Sawyer, P. H. From Roman Britain to Norman England.

Yorke, B. Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England.

Places to Visit

Ad Gefrin (Yeavering), Northumberland

Sutton Hoo, Suffolk

West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village, Suffolk

Offa's Dyke National Trail

The British Museum, London (Early Medieval Collections)

The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent *(Staffordshire Hoard collection)*

Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery *(Staffordshire Hoard collection)*

Jarrow Hall, Tyne and Wear

About the Author

Matthew Armitage is a writer and former archaeologist who worked with five major archaeological organisations before moving into the heritage sector. His field experience includes excavation, landscape survey and artefact recording across Britain and overseas.

He is the author of *Before England*, a narrative history of Britain from the Ice Age to the Norman Conquest and writes to make archaeology accessible through evidence-based storytelling.

Matthew is also Managing Director of the historic Tooley's Boatyard in Banbury and continues to promote Britain's archaeological and industrial heritage through research, publications and public engagement.

About Before England

Before England traces Britain's story from the earliest evidence of human occupation to the Norman Conquest, following almost a million years of history through archaeology, landscape and changing environments.

The *Before England Learning Companion* series complements the book by exploring the archaeological evidence behind each major period. Together they provide both the story of Britain's past and the discoveries that allow archaeologists to reconstruct it.

Continue Exploring Britain's Past

This guide is one volume in the **Before England Learning Companion** series.

1. **The Lower Palaeolithic**
   Britain's First People and the Earliest Evidence
2. **The Middle Palaeolithic**
   Neanderthals and Ice Age Britain
3. **The Upper Palaeolithic**
   Modern Humans and the Return to Britain
4. **The Mesolithic**
   Hunter-Gatherers and a Changing Landscape
5. **The Neolithic**
   Farmers, Monuments and the First Communities
6. **The Bronze Age**
   Farming, Communities and the First Landscapes
7. **The Iron Age**
   Hillforts, Tribal Life and the Landscape of Power
8. **Roman Britain**
   Conquest, Settlement and Life in a Provincial World
9. **Early Anglo-Saxon Britain**
   Settlements, Faith and the Forging of Kingdoms
10. **Later Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms**
    Kings, Kingdoms and a Changing Britain
11. **Viking Britain**
    Raids, Settlements and the Making of England
12. **The Norman Conquest**
    Invasion, Conquest and a New Order