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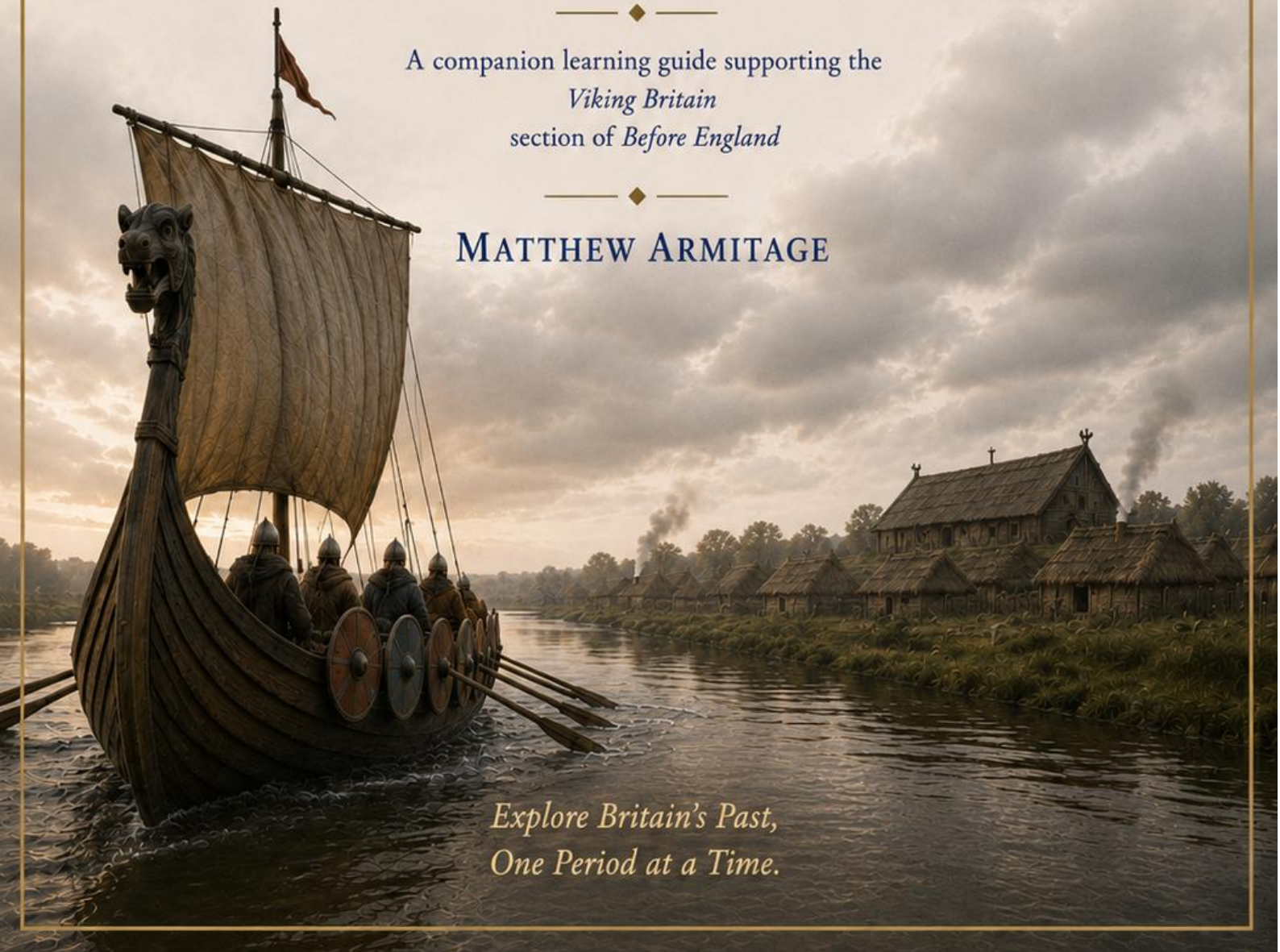
LEARNING COMPANION 11

# VIKING BRITAIN

## *Raids, Settlements and the Making of England*

A companion learning guide supporting the
*Viking Britain*
section of *Before England*

MATTHEW ARMITAGE



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

# Before England Learning Companion 11

# Viking Britain

# Raids, Settlements and

# the Making of England

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Part of the Before England Learning Companion series.

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# BEFORE ENGLAND LEARNING COMPANION 11

Welcome to the Eleventh 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.

Viking Britain spans approximately CE 866 to 1066, a period of conquest, settlement and cultural change that reshaped England forever. Although the Vikings are often remembered as fierce raiders arriving in longships to attack monasteries and coastal settlements, archaeology reveals a much richer and more complex story. They were also farmers, merchants, craftsmen, shipbuilders and rulers who established thriving communities and became part of the fabric of English society.

This was an age of remarkable transformation. Scandinavian armies conquered much of eastern and northern England, creating the Danelaw and establishing new kingdoms alongside the Anglo-Saxon realm of Wessex. Great trading centres flourished, international commerce expanded and towns such as York became among the most prosperous in northern Europe. The struggle between the Viking kingdoms and the kings of Wessex eventually led to the emergence of a stronger and more unified England.

Unlike many earlier periods, the Viking Age is illuminated by both archaeology and contemporary written sources. Excavations at sites such as Repton, Torksey and Coppergate reveal extraordinary evidence for Viking camps, towns, workshops and everyday life, while chronicles, coins, hoards and scientific analysis allow archaeologists to compare historical accounts with the evidence preserved beneath the ground. Together they provide one of the clearest pictures of any period before the Norman Conquest.

Archaeology continues to transform our understanding of Viking Britain. Discoveries from winter camps, settlements, cemeteries and trading towns show that the Vikings did far more than raid the English coast. They built communities, traded across Europe and beyond, introduced new skills and technologies, and influenced language, law and patterns of settlement that can still be recognised today. Their story is one of adaptation, cooperation and cultural exchange as much as conquest.

This companion introduces the principal archaeological discoveries, important sites and historical evidence that allow us to explore Viking Britain and understand how the interaction between Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian peoples helped shape the England that would eventually emerge before the Norman Conquest.

# Period at a Glance

Dates: CE 866–1066

**Who lived in Britain?**

Anglo-Saxons, Vikings from Scandinavia, Anglo-Scandinavian communities, farmers, craftsmen, merchants, monks, nobles, kings and queens living in villages, towns and growing kingdoms.

**How people lived**

Most people continued to farm the land, but towns expanded, trade flourished and new Scandinavian settlements appeared across much of northern and eastern England. Merchants travelled widely, craftsmen produced goods of exceptional quality and ships linked Britain with Scandinavia, Ireland, continental Europe and beyond. Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian traditions gradually merged to create a distinctive Anglo-Scandinavian society.

Important developments

- The Great Heathen Army conquers much of eastern and northern England.
- The Danelaw is established across large parts of England.
- Alfred the Great reorganises Wessex and begins the recovery of England.
- Viking towns such as York become major centres of trade and craftsmanship.
- Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian communities gradually integrate.
- Danish kings, including Cnut, rule England during the early eleventh century.
- Edward the Confessor restores Anglo-Saxon rule before the Norman invasion.
- The period ends with the Norman Conquest in CE 1066.

**What archaeologists find**

Winter camps, fortified towns, longhouses, workshops, silver hoards, coins, weapons, jewellery, ship fittings, combs, leather shoes, wooden objects, imported goods, burials and evidence for international trade.

**Why this period matters**

The Viking Age transformed England politically, economically and culturally. Scandinavian settlement reshaped language, law, trade and patterns of settlement, while the conflict and cooperation between Anglo-Saxon and Viking kingdoms helped create a stronger and more unified English kingdom. Archaeology shows that this was far more than an age of raiding, it was a period of settlement, innovation and lasting cultural exchange.




Research Companion 11

# Viking Britain

## Key Sites in Britain

### 1 Coppergate, York

Excavations at Coppergate reveal an extraordinary picture of everyday life in the Viking city of Jórvík.

**Evidence found:** Timber buildings, leather shoes, wooden bowls, combs, textiles, tools, food remains and craft workshops.

### 2 Repton, Derbyshire

A winter camp of the Great Heathen Army with a large burial complex.

**Evidence found:** Winter camp, burial complex, weapons, earthworks, coins and human remains.

### 3 Torksey, Lincolnshire

One of the largest Viking winter camps, showing a large, organised settlement of thousands of people.

**Evidence found:** Temporary settlement, workshops, furnaces, coins, weights, metalworking debris and imported goods.

### 4 York (Jórvík)

Archaeology across York shows a major Viking trading city and thriving community linked across Europe.

**Evidence found:** Streets, workshops, churches, houses, imported goods, coins, jewellery and pottery.

### 5 Cuerdale Hoard, Lancashire

One of the largest Viking silver hoards found in Britain, discovered near the River Ribble.

**Evidence found:** Silver coins, ingots, jewellery, hacksilver and imported objects.

# What Was Viking Britain?

The Viking Age in Britain lasted from approximately CE 866 to 1066, a period during which Scandinavian settlers became a permanent part of English society. Although Viking raids had begun decades earlier, the arrival of the Great Heathen Army in CE 866 marked a decisive turning point. Instead of carrying out seasonal attacks before returning home, Viking armies conquered kingdoms, established settlements and created new centres of power that would influence England for the next two centuries.

The Vikings came mainly from Denmark and Norway, crossing the North Sea in fast, seaworthy ships that allowed them to travel, trade and wage war over great distances. At first they targeted wealthy monasteries and coastal settlements, but as time passed many chose to settle permanently. They established farms, founded towns, intermarried with local communities and became part of everyday life across much of northern and eastern England.

One of the most important developments of the period was the creation of the Danelaw. This was the area of England where Scandinavian law, customs and settlement became firmly established following agreements between the Viking leaders and the kings of Wessex. Rather than replacing Anglo-Saxon society, archaeology shows that Scandinavian settlers and the existing population gradually adapted to one another. Their languages, traditions and ways of life blended to create a distinctive Anglo-Scandinavian culture whose influence can still be recognised today.

The Viking Age was also a period of remarkable economic growth. Trading towns such as York (Jórvík) developed into some of the busiest commercial centres in northern Europe. Merchants exchanged silver, cloth, furs, pottery, wine and luxury goods with communities across Scandinavia, Ireland, the Frankish kingdoms and beyond. Skilled craftsmen produced jewellery, weapons, combs, leather goods and finely decorated metalwork, while shipbuilders continued to construct vessels that connected Britain with the wider Viking world.

The period was shaped by both conflict and cooperation. The kings of Wessex, particularly Alfred the Great, resisted Viking expansion and reorganised their kingdom through the construction of defended towns, military reforms and more effective systems of government. Over time, Alfred's successors gradually recovered territories within the Danelaw, creating an increasingly unified English kingdom while continuing to absorb Scandinavian influences into English society.

Archaeology has transformed our understanding of Viking Britain. Excavations of winter camps at Repton and Torksey, the extraordinary preservation of Viking York at Coppergate, and discoveries such as the Cuerdale Hoard reveal that this was far more than an age of warfare. It was a period of migration, settlement, trade, craftsmanship and cultural exchange that reshaped England and laid many of the foundations of the medieval kingdom that followed.

# Who Were the Vikings?

The Vikings were people from Scandinavia, particularly Denmark, Norway and, to a lesser extent, Sweden, who travelled widely across Europe between the eighth and eleventh centuries. Although they are often remembered as fierce warriors and raiders, archaeology reveals that they were also farmers, fishermen, merchants, craftsmen, explorers and settlers. Many came to Britain not simply to fight but to build new lives, establishing communities that became part of English society for generations.

The word "Viking" originally described an activity rather than a people. It referred to those who went on overseas expeditions, whether for trade, exploration or warfare. Most Scandinavians never became Vikings in this sense. Instead, they lived as ordinary farmers and craftspeople, raising families and working the land much like their Anglo-Saxon neighbours.

The first Viking attacks on Britain were small coastal raids aimed at wealthy monasteries and settlements. The attack on Lindisfarne in CE 793 shocked the Christian world, but these early expeditions were only the beginning. By the middle of the ninth century, Scandinavian armies had become larger and far better organised. The arrival of the Great Heathen Army in CE 866 marked a new phase in which conquest and permanent settlement replaced seasonal raiding.

Many Vikings settled in northern and eastern England, where they established farms, villages and towns. Rather than living separately from the local population, they gradually integrated with Anglo-Saxon communities through trade, marriage and shared economic life. Archaeological evidence suggests that many settlements developed into mixed Anglo-Scandinavian communities where people adopted elements of both cultures while continuing to maintain aspects of their own traditions.

Most Vikings were farmers. They cultivated crops, kept cattle, sheep and pigs, fished in rivers and seas, and hunted wild animals when opportunities arose. Others became skilled craftsmen, producing jewellery, weapons, wooden objects, leather goods and beautifully carved bone and antler artefacts. Merchants travelled enormous distances, trading silver, furs, amber, cloth and luxury goods between Britain, Scandinavia, Ireland, continental Europe and even the Islamic world.

The Vikings were also exceptional shipbuilders. Their longships were among the most advanced vessels of their age, combining speed, strength and shallow draughts that allowed them to cross oceans, sail along coastlines and navigate rivers deep into the interior of Europe. These ships made possible not only warfare but also exploration, trade and migration on an unprecedented scale.

Modern archaeology has transformed our understanding of the Vikings. Excavations at Coppergate, Repton, Torksey and many other sites show that they were far more than raiders. They established prosperous towns, developed extensive trading networks and became an integral part of English society. Their influence can still be seen today in language, place names, law, farming and the landscape itself, making them one of the most significant peoples in the story of medieval Britain.

# How Do We Know?

The Viking Age is one of the best understood periods before the Norman Conquest because it is illuminated by an exceptional combination of archaeology, written history and scientific research. Excavations of Viking camps, towns, settlements and cemeteries have produced remarkable evidence for everyday life, while chronicles, coins and historical documents help place these discoveries within their wider historical context. Together, these different sources allow archaeologists to reconstruct Viking Britain in extraordinary detail.

Some of the most important discoveries come from the Viking winter camps at Repton in Derbyshire and Torksey in Lincolnshire. Excavations at these sites have revealed that the Great Heathen Army was far larger and more organised than historians once believed. Archaeologists have uncovered evidence for temporary settlements, workshops, metalworking, trade and large burial grounds, showing that these camps functioned as thriving communities rather than simple military encampments.

Even more remarkable evidence comes from Coppergate in York. Exceptional waterlogged conditions preserved timber buildings, leather shoes, wooden bowls, combs, textiles, tools and food remains that would normally have decayed centuries ago. Archaeologists have even recovered insects, parasites and plant remains, allowing them to reconstruct diet, sanitation and living conditions in remarkable detail. Together, these discoveries provide one of the most complete pictures of everyday life in the Viking world.

Scientific techniques continue to deepen our understanding of the period. Radiocarbon dating establishes the age of archaeological deposits, while environmental archaeology examines pollen, seeds, charcoal and animal bones to reconstruct the surrounding landscape and farming practices. Isotope analysis helps identify where individuals grew up and how they moved during their lives, while the study of coins and silver hoards reveals patterns of trade, wealth and political authority across England and the wider Viking world.

Written sources also provide valuable information, although they must always be interpreted carefully. Works such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Asser's *Life of King Alfred* and Irish annals describe many of the major events of the Viking Age. However, these accounts were often written from the viewpoint of the people who opposed the Vikings and naturally emphasise warfare and destruction. Archaeology helps balance these narratives by revealing the lives of ordinary settlers, merchants, craftsmen and farming communities whose stories rarely appear in written history.

By combining excavation, scientific analysis and historical records, archaeologists have built an increasingly detailed picture of Viking Britain. Every new discovery adds to our understanding, revealing that this was not simply an age of raids and battles but a period of settlement, trade, cultural exchange and political change that permanently transformed the history of England.

# Timeline

**CE 866**
**The Great Heathen Army arrives**
A large Scandinavian army lands in England, conquering kingdoms and establishing permanent settlements. This marks the beginning of the Viking Age in England.

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**CE 867**
**York is captured**
The Vikings seize the city of York, which becomes the capital of the Viking kingdom of Jórvík and one of the greatest trading centres in northern Europe.

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**CE 878**
**The Battle of Edington**
King Alfred of Wessex defeats the Viking leader Guthrum. The victory secures Wessex and lays the foundations for the recovery of England.

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**Late ninth century (c. CE 880–900)**
**The Danelaw is established**
Large areas of eastern and northern England come under Scandinavian rule. Anglo-Saxon and Viking communities gradually begin to live and work alongside one another.

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**Late ninth century (c. CE 880–899)**
**Alfred builds the burhs**
Alfred creates a network of defended towns to protect Wessex from future Viking attacks. These fortified settlements also become important centres of trade and administration.

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**Early tenth century (c. CE 900–950)**
**The English kingdoms are reunited**
Alfred's successors gradually recover the Danelaw, bringing much of England under a single royal authority while Scandinavian communities remain an important part of society.

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**CE 954**
**The Viking Kingdom of York comes to an end**
The last Viking king of York, Erik Bloodaxe, is driven out. York becomes part of the growing English kingdom, although its Scandinavian character continues for many generations.

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**CE 1016**
**Cnut becomes King of England**
Following years of conflict, the Danish king Cnut rules England, creating a North Sea empire that links England with Denmark and Norway.

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**CE 1042**
**Edward the Confessor becomes king**
Anglo-Saxon rule is restored after the death of Cnut's dynasty, but England remains strongly influenced by both Scandinavian and continental European traditions.

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**CE 1066**
**The Norman Conquest**
William, Duke of Normandy, defeats King Harold II at the Battle of Hastings. The Norman Conquest brings the Viking Age in England to an end and begins a new chapter in British history.

# Main Discoveries

The Viking Age has produced some of the most remarkable archaeological discoveries in Britain. Winter camps, trading towns, silver hoards and burials have transformed our understanding of the Scandinavian settlers who came to England. Together, these sites reveal that the Vikings were not simply warriors but also merchants, craftsmen, farmers and rulers whose influence reshaped English society.

## Coppergate, York

Coppergate is one of the most important archaeological sites ever excavated in Britain. Exceptional waterlogged conditions preserved timber houses, workshops, leather shoes, wooden bowls, combs, tools and food remains that would normally have disappeared centuries ago. The excavations provide an extraordinary picture of everyday life in the Viking city of Jórvík.

**Evidence found:** Timber buildings, leather shoes, wooden bowls, combs, textiles, tools, food remains, insect evidence, animal bones and evidence of craft workshops.

## Repton, Derbyshire

Repton was one of the winter camps of the Great Heathen Army. Excavations uncovered defensive earthworks, workshops and a remarkable burial complex containing the remains of numerous individuals. Scientific dating has confirmed the site's close association with the Viking army that conquered much of England during the ninth century.

**Evidence found:** Winter camp, burial complex, weapons, defensive earthworks, metalworking evidence, coins and human remains.

## Torksey, Lincolnshire

Torksey is one of the largest Viking winter camps ever discovered. Archaeologists have uncovered evidence for thousands of people living within the camp, together with metalworking, trade, coin use and the repair of weapons and equipment. The discoveries show that Viking armies operated as organised communities rather than temporary raiding parties.

**Evidence found:** Temporary settlement, workshops, furnaces, coins, weights, metalworking debris, imported goods and evidence of large-scale occupation.

## York (Jórvík)

The wider archaeological excavations across York demonstrate how the city became one of northern Europe's greatest commercial centres. Markets, workshops, churches and houses reveal a prosperous Anglo-Scandinavian community connected to trading networks stretching across Europe and beyond.

**Evidence found:** Streets, workshops, churches, houses, imported goods, coins, jewellery, pottery and evidence of long-distance trade.

## Cuerdale Hoard, Lancashire

Discovered near the River Ribble, the Cuerdale Hoard is one of the largest Viking silver hoards ever found. It contains thousands of silver coins, ingots, jewellery and pieces of hacksilver from across Europe and the Viking world, illustrating the wealth and international trade of the tenth century.

**Evidence found:** Silver coins, ingots, jewellery, hacksilver, bullion and imported objects from across Europe.

## Ridgeway Hill, Dorset

Ridgeway Hill contains the remains of around fifty young men who were executed during the Viking Age. Scientific analysis suggests that many originated in Scandinavia. The site provides powerful evidence for the violence and human cost of warfare during this turbulent period.

**Evidence found:** Human skeletons, weapon injuries, isotope evidence, osteological analysis and evidence of execution.

## Why These Sites Matter

Each of these discoveries reveals a different aspect of Viking Britain. Repton and Torksey demonstrate the organisation of the Great Heathen Army, while Coppergate and the wider excavations at York reveal the everyday lives of merchants, craftsmen and families living in one of Europe's greatest Viking cities. The Cuerdale Hoard illustrates the international trade that connected England with Scandinavia, Ireland and beyond, while Ridgeway Hill reminds us of the human cost of warfare during this period.

Together, these sites show that the Viking Age was far more than a story of raids and conquest. It was a period of settlement, commerce, technological skill and cultural exchange that transformed England and helped shape the medieval kingdom that followed.

# Climate and Environment

The climate of Viking Britain was broadly similar to that of today, with cool winters, mild summers and sufficient rainfall to support farming across much of England. By the ninth century, the countryside had already been shaped by thousands of years of cultivation. Fields, hedgerows, villages, monasteries and towns covered much of the landscape, while woodlands, rivers and marshes continued to provide valuable natural resources. Viking settlers entered a countryside that was already well established and gradually adapted it to meet their own needs.

Most people depended upon farming for their survival. Wheat, barley, rye and oats remained the principal crops, while cattle, sheep, pigs and horses formed the basis of the rural economy. Scandinavian settlers introduced their own farming traditions, but archaeological evidence suggests that many existing Anglo-Saxon methods continued. Rather than replacing the countryside, Viking communities generally became part of it, sharing techniques, livestock and local knowledge with the people already living there.

Woodland remained one of the most important resources. Timber was needed to build houses, barns, workshops, bridges and ships, while smaller trees provided fencing, tool handles and firewood. Forests also supplied game, berries, nuts and other wild foods, and pigs continued to forage among the oak and beech woods during the autumn. Careful management of woodland ensured that these resources remained available for future generations.

Rivers and the sea played an even greater role during the Viking Age than they had before. The Vikings were skilled sailors who used rivers such as the Thames, Trent, Humber and Ouse as natural highways, travelling deep into the interior of England. Coastal waters and the North Sea connected Britain with Scandinavia, Ireland and continental Europe, allowing merchants to transport silver, cloth, pottery, wine, timber and many other goods. Settlements beside navigable rivers often developed into thriving centres of trade and communication.

Environmental archaeology has greatly expanded our understanding of Viking landscapes. Pollen analysis reveals the continued expansion of farmland, while seeds, charcoal and animal bones recovered from settlements provide evidence for crops, livestock and woodland management. Excavations at York and other Viking towns also preserve insects, parasites and plant remains, giving archaeologists an unusually detailed picture of sanitation, food production and the conditions in which people lived.

The evidence shows that Viking Britain was a carefully managed and productive landscape. Scandinavian settlers adapted to the English countryside while contributing new ideas, skills and trading connections. Together with the Anglo-Saxon population, they created an environment capable of supporting growing towns, prosperous farms and one of the most dynamic economies of early medieval Europe.

### Did You Know?

Archaeologists at Coppergate in York have recovered tiny seeds, pollen grains, insects and even fossilised parasites from Viking deposits. These remarkable discoveries allow scientists to reconstruct not only the environment but also what people ate, how clean their streets were and even the diseases they suffered more than 1,000 years ago.

# Everyday Life

Although the Viking Age is often remembered for battles and longships, the lives of most people were centred on farming, family and work. The majority of Scandinavians who settled in England became ordinary members of their local communities, cultivating the land, raising livestock and taking part in trade. Archaeology shows that everyday life for many Viking families was remarkably similar to that of their Anglo-Saxon neighbours, with both cultures gradually influencing one another over time.

Most people lived in timber houses built from sturdy wooden frames with walls of planks or wattle and daub and roofs thatched with straw or reeds. Homes usually consisted of a single large room with a central hearth used for cooking, heating and light. Around the house stood workshops, animal pens and storage buildings where food, tools and farming equipment were kept. Villages often developed close to rivers, fertile farmland or established trade routes.

Farming remained the foundation of everyday life. Families grew wheat, barley, rye and oats, while cattle, sheep, pigs and goats provided meat, milk, wool and leather. Fishing in rivers and along the coast was an important source of food, and hunting deer, wild birds and other animals supplemented the diet. Bread, porridge, vegetables and ale formed the basis of most meals, while wealthier households enjoyed a greater variety of meat and imported foods.

Craftsmanship was highly valued within Viking society. Blacksmiths forged tools, knives, axes and weapons, while skilled artisans produced jewellery, wooden bowls, leather goods, woven cloth and beautifully carved objects from bone and antler. Women often played a central role in spinning wool, weaving cloth and managing the household, while children learned practical skills from an early age by helping with farming and domestic work.

Trade brought new opportunities and connected communities across Europe. Markets in towns such as York attracted merchants from England, Ireland, Scandinavia and the Continent. Silver was widely used in commerce, either as coins or pieces of cut silver known as hacksilver, which could be weighed to determine its value. Imported pottery, glassware, silk and other luxury goods found during excavations demonstrate how far trade networks extended.

Religion also shaped everyday life. During the early Viking Age, many Scandinavian settlers followed the traditional Norse gods, including Odin and Thor. As they settled in England, however, Christianity gradually spread through Viking communities, and by the tenth century many Scandinavian families had adopted the Christian faith. Churches became places of worship, community gathering and burial, while Christian festivals increasingly marked the rhythm of the year.

Archaeological excavations at sites such as Coppergate reveal a vivid picture of daily life. Preserved houses, workshops, clothing, tools, food remains and even children's toys show that Viking communities were busy, skilled and prosperous. Far from living only by warfare, they created thriving settlements that became an enduring part of England's history.

### Did You Know?

Archaeologists excavating Coppergate discovered beautifully carved bone and antler combs made by Viking craftsmen. Combs were everyday personal possessions, and many people carried them in decorated leather cases attached to their belts, showing that personal appearance and cleanliness were important in Viking society.

# Technology and Innovation

The Viking Age was a period of remarkable technological skill and innovation. Scandinavian craftsmen were highly respected for their abilities in shipbuilding, metalworking, woodworking and trade, while the interaction between Viking and Anglo-Saxon communities encouraged the exchange of new ideas and techniques. Archaeology shows that this was not simply an age of warriors but one of engineers, craftsmen and merchants whose skills helped transform medieval England.

The greatest technological achievement of the Vikings was their ships. Longships were carefully designed to be both fast and flexible, with clinker-built wooden hulls that made them strong yet lightweight. Their shallow draught allowed them to cross open seas, sail along coastlines and travel many kilometres inland using rivers. Powered by both oars and sails, these vessels enabled the Vikings to raid, trade, explore and settle across much of Europe and even reach Iceland, Greenland and North America centuries before Columbus.

Metalworking reached an exceptionally high standard. Blacksmiths forged axes, swords, spears, knives, locks, keys and farming tools using high-quality iron and steel. Skilled jewellers produced brooches, arm rings, necklaces and decorative fittings from silver, gold and bronze, often decorated with intricate animal designs that remain instantly recognisable today. The silver hoards discovered across Britain demonstrate both the wealth of Viking society and the remarkable craftsmanship of its metalworkers.

Woodworking was equally important. Skilled carpenters built the houses, bridges, ships and other structures on which Viking communities depended, while also producing many of the everyday objects used in homes and workshops. Exceptional preservation at Coppergate has allowed archaeologists to recover hundreds of wooden artefacts, providing an unusually detailed picture of Viking craftsmanship and daily life.

Trade depended upon accurate systems of weighing and exchange. Viking merchants carried small folding balances together with carefully made bronze and lead weights that allowed silver to be measured precisely during commercial transactions. Silver was often traded by weight rather than by coin alone, demonstrating the sophistication of the Viking economy. Archaeological discoveries of balances, weights and hacksilver reveal a commercial system that connected England with Scandinavia, Ireland, the Frankish kingdoms and even the Islamic world.

Coinage also became increasingly important. Viking rulers adopted and adapted existing Anglo-Saxon minting traditions, issuing coins that displayed both royal authority and economic stability. These coins circulated alongside silver bullion and helped support growing towns such as York, where trade flourished throughout the tenth century.

The archaeological evidence demonstrates that the Vikings were among the most accomplished craftsmen and engineers of early medieval Europe. Their ships transformed travel and exploration, their craftsmen produced objects of exceptional beauty and quality, and their commercial innovations helped create one of the most extensive trading networks of the age. Together, these achievements left a lasting influence on England and the wider medieval world.

Did You Know?

Some Viking merchants carried folding balance scales small enough to fit inside a pouch on their belt. Together with sets of carefully made bronze weights, they allowed traders to measure pieces of silver accurately, making business possible almost anywhere in the Viking world.

# People and Society

Viking society was organised around families, local communities and powerful leaders. Although Viking kings and warriors feature prominently in both history and legend, most people lived as farmers, craftsmen, merchants or fishermen. During the two centuries of Scandinavian settlement in England, Anglo-Saxon and Viking communities gradually became integrated, creating a distinctive Anglo-Scandinavian identity.

At the top of society stood kings and powerful nobles, known in Scandinavia as jarls. They controlled land, led armies, settled disputes and rewarded loyal followers with wealth and property. Their authority depended upon military success, justice, alliances and support for trade. Great halls served as centres of government where rulers welcomed guests, held feasts and made important political decisions.

Most people were free farmers who worked their own land. They cultivated crops, cared for livestock and supported their families through hard work and cooperation. Many farms were largely self-sufficient, producing food, clothing and everyday tools. Archaeological excavations show that Viking settlements often included workshops, barns, animal pens and storage buildings alongside family homes.

Craftsmen occupied an important position within Viking communities. Blacksmiths forged tools and weapons, shipwrights built and repaired vessels, woodworkers produced furniture and household goods, while jewellers created finely decorated brooches, arm rings and silver ornaments. Discoveries from York reveal specialised workshops producing goods for local use and international trade.

Women played a central role in Viking society. They managed households, prepared food, raised children and supervised textile production, one of the most valuable industries of the period. Many also took responsibility for farms and estates when their husbands travelled or fought in military campaigns. Jewellery, keys, spindle whorls and weaving equipment demonstrate both their practical responsibilities and social status. Some women accumulated considerable wealth and influence.

Trade encouraged the growth of prosperous towns where merchants from many backgrounds exchanged goods and ideas. York became one of the greatest commercial centres in northern Europe, attracting traders from Scandinavia, Ireland, the Frankish kingdoms and beyond. This movement of people helped blend Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian traditions, influencing language, law, craftsmanship and everyday customs.

Although slavery continued to exist, particularly following warfare and raiding, many Viking settlers eventually became peaceful members of local communities. Over time, differences between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians became less important as families intermarried, shared opportunities and adopted each other's customs. By the eleventh century, much of England had become an Anglo-Scandinavian society whose cultural influence is still visible today.

Archaeology reveals that Viking Britain was not simply a society of warriors. It was a complex world built upon farming, craftsmanship, trade and cooperation, where people from different backgrounds came together to shape the future of England.

Did You Know?

Many everyday English words, including sky, egg, knife, window, husband and law, come from the language spoken by the Vikings. Their influence on English was so great that we still use hundreds of Old Norse words every day without realising their Scandinavian origins.

# Beliefs and Religion

Religion changed dramatically during the Viking Age. When the first Scandinavian settlers arrived in England, many followed the traditional Norse religion, worshipping gods such as Odin, Thor, Frey and Freyja. Their beliefs were closely connected to warfare, nature, family and honour, and stories about these gods were passed down through generations by word of mouth. Over time, many Vikings adopted Christianity, and by the end of the period the two cultures had become united by a shared Christian faith.

The Norse gods were believed to influence every aspect of life. Odin was associated with wisdom, kingship and poetry, while Thor, armed with his hammer Mjölnir, protected both gods and people from danger. Sacred places included groves, springs and burial mounds, and religious ceremonies often involved feasting, sacrifices and the sharing of food and drink. Although few Viking temples survive in Britain, archaeology has uncovered Thor's hammer pendants that demonstrate the continued importance of traditional beliefs during the early years of Scandinavian settlement.

As Vikings settled permanently in England, many came into regular contact with Christian communities. Monasteries, churches and priests formed part of everyday life, while intermarriage between Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian families encouraged the spread of Christianity. Viking rulers also recognised that adopting Christianity strengthened political alliances with neighbouring kingdoms and supported their authority over Scandinavian and English subjects.

By the tenth century, Christianity had become firmly established throughout Viking England. Churches were built in towns and rural settlements, while Christian burial customs gradually replaced earlier pagan traditions. Stone crosses decorated with both Christian symbols and Scandinavian artistic styles illustrate how the two cultures merged. Rather than replacing one tradition with another overnight, archaeology suggests the change was gradual, with elements of Norse art and symbolism continuing long after conversion.

Religion also encouraged learning and literacy. Monasteries remained centres of education, where monks copied books, recorded historical events and preserved religious texts. Even during periods of conflict, Christianity provided a shared belief system that helped bring Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian communities together. By the time of King Cnut in the early eleventh century, Christian kingship had become accepted throughout England.

Archaeology continues to expand our understanding of this religious transformation. Excavations of churches, monasteries and cemeteries, together with discoveries of crosses, carved stones, jewellery and burial goods, reveal how beliefs evolved over time. The evidence shows that Viking Britain was not simply a period of conflict between pagans and Christians but one of cultural exchange, adaptation and the gradual emergence of a shared religious identity.

By the end of the Viking Age, Christianity had become one of the strongest forces uniting England. It influenced government, education, law and everyday life, helping to create a society that was increasingly stable and connected as it approached the Norman Conquest.

Did You Know?

Archaeologists have discovered Thor's hammer pendants and Christian crosses buried in the same Viking communities. Some people may even have worn both symbols, reflecting a period when old beliefs and the new Christian faith existed side by side before Christianity became firmly established.

# Britain and the Wider World

During the Viking Age, England became part of one of the largest trading and communication networks in early medieval Europe. Scandinavian ships connected Britain with Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Ireland, the Frankish kingdoms, the Baltic and even the Islamic world. People, goods, ideas and technologies travelled enormous distances, making Viking England far more connected to the outside world than many people once believed.

Trade formed the foundation of these international links. Merchants carried silver, furs, amber, walrus ivory and whetstones from Scandinavia, while England exported wool, cloth, leather, grain and finely crafted metalwork. Archaeological excavations at York, Lincoln and other trading centres have uncovered imported pottery, glass, jewellery and coins from across Europe, demonstrating the wide reach of Viking commerce. The bustling markets of Viking England brought together people from many different cultures, languages and traditions.

Silver was at the heart of the Viking economy. Rather than relying entirely on coins, merchants often traded using pieces of cut silver known as hacksilver, together with silver ingots and carefully made weighing scales. Hoards such as the Cuerdale Hoard reveal enormous quantities of wealth moving through England during the tenth century. Some of the coins and objects within these hoards originated hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away, illustrating the remarkable scale of Viking trade.

The Vikings were also great explorers. Their ships carried them across the North Atlantic to Iceland, Greenland and the coast of North America, while eastern trade routes followed the great rivers of Russia to the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic Caliphates. Goods and ideas travelled along these routes, linking England to places that most people of the time would never see but whose influence could still be found in markets and workshops across the country.

Political connections were equally important. Viking rulers forged alliances, negotiated treaties and sometimes ruled more than one kingdom. The reign of King Cnut united England, Denmark and Norway within a powerful North Sea empire, demonstrating that England was now part of a wider Scandinavian world as well as western Europe. At the same time, the English Church maintained close links with Rome and continental Europe, ensuring that religious and cultural influences continued to flow in many directions.

Archaeology has transformed our understanding of these international connections. Imported pottery from the Rhineland, Islamic silver coins, Scandinavian jewellery and evidence for overseas trade recovered from sites such as York reveal a society whose horizons stretched far beyond Britain. The Viking Age was therefore not simply a period of invasion but one of exploration, commerce and cultural exchange that connected England with much of the known world.

### Did You Know?

**Arabic silver coins, known as dirhams, have been discovered in Viking hoards across Britain. They travelled thousands of kilometres through trading networks that stretched from the Islamic world, across eastern Europe and Scandinavia, before finally reaching England. These remarkable discoveries show just how international the Viking economy had become.**

# Why Viking Britain Matters

The Viking Age was one of the most influential periods in the history of England. During these two centuries, Scandinavian settlers became part of English society, transforming the country's politics, economy and culture. What began as a period of conflict developed into one of settlement, cooperation and cultural exchange, leaving a legacy that can still be recognised in the English language, the landscape and many of our towns and villages.

The Viking Age helped shape the emergence of a united England. Although Scandinavian armies conquered much of the country during the ninth century, the response of the kings of Wessex, particularly Alfred the Great and his successors, led to stronger government, improved defence and a more organised kingdom. The eventual recovery of the Danelaw brought together Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian communities within a single English kingdom, laying important foundations for the medieval state.

Trade expanded dramatically during this period. Viking merchants connected England with Scandinavia, Ireland, continental Europe and lands far beyond. Towns such as York flourished as centres of commerce and craftsmanship, while silver coinage, weighing systems and international markets helped create one of the most prosperous economies in early medieval Europe. Archaeology shows that England was becoming increasingly outward-looking and economically connected.

The Viking influence can still be seen across Britain today. Thousands of place names ending in **-**by, -thorpe and -thwaite reflect Scandinavian settlement, while many everyday English words, including *sky*, *window*, *knife*, *egg* and *law*, have Old Norse origins. The blending of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian traditions also influenced legal customs, farming practices and patterns of settlement that survived long after the Viking Age had ended.

Modern archaeology has transformed our understanding of this remarkable period. Excavations at Coppergate, Repton and Torksey, together with discoveries such as the Cuerdale Hoard, demonstrate that the Vikings were far more than raiders. They were skilled craftsmen, successful merchants, experienced sailors and settlers who established prosperous communities throughout England. Scientific techniques continue to reveal new evidence about their origins, health, diet and daily lives, adding fresh detail to a story that is still unfolding.

Perhaps most importantly, the Viking Age reminds us that history is often shaped by cultural exchange as much as by conquest. The interaction between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians created a new Anglo-Scandinavian society that combined the strengths of both traditions. Rather than replacing one culture with another, the two peoples gradually adapted, traded, intermarried and built communities together.

The story of Viking Britain is therefore not simply one of longships and battles. It is the story of how migration, settlement, trade and cooperation reshaped England, creating a stronger and more connected kingdom whose influence would continue long after the last Viking kings had disappeared.

### Did You Know?

More than 1,500 English place names have Scandinavian origins. Names ending in -by (meaning farm or village), such as Derby, Grimsby and Whitby, mark areas where Viking settlers established new communities over a thousand years ago.

# Glossary

**Anglo-Scandinavian** – A term used to describe the blending of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian cultures during the Viking Age.

**Burh** – A fortified town established by Alfred the Great and his successors to defend England against Viking attacks.

**Cuerdale Hoard** – One of the largest Viking silver hoards ever discovered, providing important evidence for Viking trade and wealth.

**Danelaw** – The area of eastern and northern England where Scandinavian law and customs became established following Viking settlement.

**Dirham** – A silver coin from the Islamic world that reached Britain through Viking trading networks.

**Great Heathen Army** – The large Viking army that arrived in England in **CE 866**, conquering kingdoms and establishing permanent settlements.

**Hacksilver** – Pieces of cut silver used as currency, valued by weight rather than by face value.

**Jarl** – A Scandinavian noble who governed land and supported a king. Similar in status to an Anglo-Saxon ealdorman.

**Jórvík** – The Viking name for York, one of the greatest commercial cities in northern Europe.

**Longship** – A fast, clinker-built Viking ship designed for both sea voyages and river travel.

**Numismatics** – The study of coins and currency, helping archaeologists understand trade, dating and royal authority.

**Repton** – One of the principal winter camps of the Great Heathen Army, excavated in Derbyshire.

**Torksey** – A major Viking winter camp in Lincolnshire that has revealed evidence for trade, industry and military organisation.

**Thor's Hammer** – A pendant representing the Norse god Thor, worn by many Vikings as a symbol of their traditional beliefs.

**Viking** – A person from Scandinavia who travelled overseas during the Viking Age as a trader, explorer, warrior or settler.

**Winter Camp** – A temporary settlement occupied by Viking armies during the winter months, often containing workshops, markets and living areas.

**York (Coppergate)** – One of the most important archaeological sites in Britain, providing exceptional evidence for everyday life in a Viking town.

## Suggested Reading

Ashby, S. The Viking Way of Life.

Graham-Campbell, J. *The Viking World*.

Hadley, D. The Vikings in England.

Hall, R. Viking Age York.

Jesch, J. The Viking Diaspora.

Richards, J. Viking Age England.

Williams, G. Viking Britain.

Wilson, D. M. The Vikings in Britain.

## Places to Visit

JORVIK Viking Centre, York

Coppergate Archaeological Site, York

Repton, Derbyshire

Torksey, Lincolnshire

The British Museum, London *(Viking Collections)*

Yorkshire Museum, York

The Collection Museum, Lincoln

National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh *(Viking galleries)*

# 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.

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   Neanderthals and Ice Age Britain
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   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
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    Raids, Settlements and the Making of England
12. **The Norman Conquest**
    Invasion, Conquest and a New Order