

## The Invaders of the Dark Ages

Under the Romans many Britons had prospered. Rome had imposed an effective system of law and citizenship of a stable empire, a sophisticated infrastructure of good roads, prosperous towns and farms, coinage and literacy that facilitated trade and good communications within all parts of the empire. As long as Rome remained strong, Britain remained safe. But decline had set in; Rome fell to the barbarians.

When the legions were recalled in around 410, Britain entered what is often called The Dark Ages – mostly because there are few written records of that time. Roman culture in Britain did not end overnight: the Britons had adapted to Roman rule and there were settlers from all over the Roman Empire, including what is now Germany, who had been rewarded for their service in the legions with grants of land. But without the strong unifying force of a colonial power, Britain fragmented into unstable kingdoms, under threat from enemies both within and without. Even before the legions left there had been Saxon raids, for example in 408 AD, and the Roman emperor's response was that the Britons must not count on Rome to defend them.

Some Britons looked elsewhere for aid. Saxon mercenaries were implored to defend the country against invasion from the north. Before long the Angles, Saxons and Jutes from what we would know today as the Low Countries, Germany and Denmark became invaders and settlers. They were pagans, still worshipping the old Germanic gods. They were illiterate. They built their homes in wood with thatched roofs, so left few traces on the landscape.

However, discoveries like the impressive grave finds at Sutton Hoo and, more recently, the Staffordshire Hoard show a military society skilled in metal working.



Late 8th century sword pommel  
found at Woodeaton, Oxfordshire.  
© The British Museum

Early 7th century shoulder clasp  
from Sutton Hoo  
© The British Museum



One source of information is the Christian church. It had been well established in Britain, but was weakened by the fall of Rome. In 597 Pope Gregory sent a mission led by Augustine to Kent. The re-establishment of the church reintroduced literacy and stronger links to other Christian kingdoms. It also provided some of the earliest chroniclers of our history. A Welsh priest, Gildas, wrote *On the Fall of Britain* in the mid sixth century; nearly two hundred years later a Northumbrian monk, Bede, produced his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

It could be argued that Gildas represented the old Britons, the people displaced by the Romans; Bede, though he wrote in Latin, was already working in an Anglo-Saxon culture. King Alfred (or Ælfred) of Wessex (849-899) did much to establish written codes of law and he was the power behind the collection of annals that became *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: it was written in (Old) English and drew on earlier materials but was not compiled until about 892. Alfred's grandson, Æthelstan, was to become the first king of England, but that was not until 927.

What emerged from the early years of the Dark Ages was a patchwork of English kingdoms, covering roughly the same area as Roman Britain. What would later become Wales and Scotland remained potential enemy states. The Saxon kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia, sometimes powerful rivals, sometimes allies, ruled over north Oxfordshire at different times, displacing the Angles. For much of the time the boundary between them ran along the line of the present road from Swerford Heath to Deddington, though there was no road then. Hooky, when it was founded, was a frontier village lying at the border between separate Saxon kingdoms.

## ***Who was Hocca?***

Just when Hook Norton was founded lies in shadow. There are no early references to Hook Norton, and nothing is known of its origins. Place name analysts have deduced that Hook Norton means "The settlement on the hill slope of Hocca's people", and that Hocca was an Old English name. Who was Hocca?

There are few references to anyone of that name in early texts, but in documents purporting to be grants of land and rights in Canterbury for the foundation of a minster church given by Æthelberht, king of Kent in AD 605, Hocca appears as a "comes" (or "count") who witnesses or consents to the grant. Unfortunately, these charters are believed to be spurious, but it is tempting to believe that at least the names of the witnesses might be concurrent with the supposed dates.

In *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid* by Eddius Stephanus there is another reference to a man called Hocca. This time he is the bishop's "prefectus" or "reeve". A reeve in Anglo Saxon times was a senior royal official. The bishop had saved the soul of an infant, but the child had been smuggled away by his family:

The bishop's reeve, named Hocca, having sought and found him hidden among others of the British race, took him away by force and carried him off to the bishop. The boy's Christian name was Eodwald and his surname was Bishop's son: he lived in Ripon serving God until he died during the great plague. O how great and wonderful is God's mercy, Who, by his servant of honoured memory, called back to life a little child who was dead and unbaptized, so that, being baptized, he might live to inherit an eternal life of future blessedness.

Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England, <http://www.pase.ac.uk>

This Wilfrid (c.634–709/10) was Northumbrian by birth and became a controversial bishop of York but the vagaries of his life also brought him into contact (and sometimes conflict) with other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. He was invited to Mercia between 666 and 669 to perform episcopal functions, in return for which he was given land where he established monasteries or minsters. There is nothing to prove that Wilfrid (and his reeve Hocca) were instrumental in the founding of a church here, tempting though it is to speculate.

The historian John Blair postulates that an original church and settlement lay two miles further north than the heart of today's village, on the ridge close to the iron-age fort at Tadmarton Heath. It was a site on an ancient trackway, with good sightlines, essential in uncertain times. Field names indicating church land and some early archaeological finds (including a burial mound that has since been ploughed over) also support Blair's theory. Anglo-Saxon farmers were inclined to move from dilapidated wooden houses or over-exploited land so it is not impossible that the earliest settlement was just north of the road that leads from Whichford towards Milcombe about where the road to Tadmarton turns off.

Christianity might have brought stability and peace but, as King Alfred and his heirs consolidated the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of the south and midlands, they had to face more invaders from across the North Sea.

### ***The Vikings***

If Hook Norton from its earliest days was subject to the fluctuations of power between the powerful Saxon kingdoms of Wessex to the south and Mercia to the north, later still it was uncomfortably close to the Danelaw.

Like the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, the Vikings were forced westwards by adverse conditions at home. Good farming land was scarce, and their populations were growing. Power in their Scandinavian homelands was being consolidated into the hands of a few dominant leaders: younger sons, disinherited royal rivals and adventurers sought new horizons. Skilled shipbuilders and traders, they had sailed the rivers of eastern Europe, founded the Kiev Rus dynasty and formed the elite guard of the Emperor of Byzantium. They sailed the North Atlantic, setting up communities in Iceland, Greenland and even North America. The undefended monasteries of northern England were easy targets for them, and as pagans they had no scruples about attacking religious houses. In 793 they sacked Lindisfarne, setting the pattern for rapid raids on coastal communities. Their shallow longboats also enabled them to penetrate far inland. By 850, though, the Vikings were setting up winter camps rather than going back to Scandinavia. In 865 the Great Danish

Army invaded England, capturing the city of York two years later. This time they had come to stay.

The Great Pagan Army of the Danes travelled from Cambridge to Dorset in 875-6; Alfred defeated them at Edington in Wiltshire in 878. But his peace treaty with the Viking chief Guthrum acknowledged their strength by granting the invaders independent rule of land roughly east of the old Roman Watling Street, that ran northeast from London towards Chester.

It is more than likely that they had made their presence felt in Hook Norton: a Viking burial in Southrop came to light in 1848.

## **Viking Treasure**

In the nineteenth century two skeletons and a hoard of 23 Anglo-Saxon silver pennies were discovered in Southrop. Some might have gone to local people; some definitely went to different museums: five to the British Museum, for example; one was auctioned by Sotheby's and went to the National Museum of Wales. Records both of the find and its location are vague; letters to the British Museum by both Samuel Davis of Swerford Park and his employee William Colgrave relate second-hand information:

Swerford Park

July 21st

Sir,

I recd. your letter this mornng. I herein send you three more coins – which are all I have – twenty three were found – some have been broken – and others have been given to different persons, who are now unwilling to part with them, excepting at a high price – having been told they are valuable I therefore do not choose to buy them – for as I do not understand coins, I might not be able to make my money again, and I cannot afford to keep them.... The coins were found all sticking together, under, or beside two human skeletons – I was not present when they were first dug up – but saw them a few hours afterwards – it was in a cottage garden, or orchard, in the village of Hook Norton – Oxon – they were about a yard deep in the ground I measured a leg bone, it was 22 inches long from the ankle to the knee. The arms and other bones – were very perfect,

and of a very large size; they were very perfect till they had been exposed to the air for some time; the skulls were.... very large, and the teeth sound – the bones have since been broken by being dug up again to show other persons – the man who has the ground talks of digging the rest over, when he has time – but as he is a poor man, that may be some time first – several curious things have been dug up at different times, at and near Hook Norton – but have been lost or destroyed, as no one cared about them.

William Colgrave

(The spelling and punctuation are as reproduced in "The Hook Norton Hoard of 1848: A Viking burial from Oxfordshire?" (*Oxoniensia*, Vol. LII, 1987) by John Blair and Martin Biddle)

The coins indicate a date of burial of about 875 or a little later (at about the time the Danish Army was on its way into Wessex, or returning from the battle of Edington); the burial itself is typical of Viking practice. As the graves contained not only coins but possibly at least one silver bangle, it seems unlikely that the Vikings died in battle and were buried by their enemies.

### ***The battle of Hook Norton***

Nearly forty years later, the Danes were still a problem. In about 913 the battle of Hook Norton took place. The invaders came from Northampton and Leicester in the Danelaw, and the men of Hook Norton fought them close to the iron-age Tadmarton Camp on the northeast of today's parish.

The incident is recorded by several early historians.

AD 913: In this year the army from Northampton and Leicester rode out after Easter and broke the peace, and killed many men at Hook Norton and round about there. And then very soon after that, as the one force came home, they met another raiding band which rode out against Luton. And then the people of the district became aware of it and fought against them and reduced them to full flight.

*The Anglo Saxon Chronicle.* Translation by John Blair

The 12th century historian, John of Worcester, who drew on texts since lost of the Anglo Saxon Chronicle, also described the Viking raid of that year:

After Easter the pagan army from Northampton and Leicester plundered Oxfordshire, and killed many men in the royal vill Hook Norton and in many other places.

### ***Hook Norton, royal vill?***

John of Worcester refers to Hook Norton as being a royal vill. This is an indication that it was an important royal estate. Theoretically, all land was owned by the monarch: he might reward people with titles and rights in manors or other possessions, but it was the royal prerogative to revoke such gifts. A royal vill, though, was land retained by the king himself, possibly with a royal hall and an important church. Hook Norton might well have been part of a royal estate which was divided into individual manors in the tenth century.

Perhaps after 913, the village was refounded away from the battlefield. By that time the Anglo-Saxons were building in stone. St Peter's church in the heart of the present village has late Anglo-Saxon features, specifically long and short quoins on the eastern end of the nave.

### ***The Legacy of the Dark Ages***

The Vikings came and settled the Danelaw. Further north and east of Banbury, their heritage is seen in place names but they can never have been very numerous here where the oldest field names are from Old English. The Anglo-Saxons gave their adopted country its name, England, and a language, English. Under pressure from the Danes, King Alfred had organised defensible burghs. Mercia followed suit. The country was divided into shires (Oxfordshire in 1010, fifty years after Berkshire), and in turn into "hundreds" that had the power to hold local courts, acknowledged military obligations and were administrative units for the royal government. Manors and nucleated villages had come into existence; there were systematic written records and a clear fiscal system. There was a social structure downwards from the king

and his nobles; there were freemen and slaves. The lord of the manor had his own estate, but large fields were held in common and individual peasants had scattered strips of land in different fields, meaning that no one had exclusively very rich or very unproductive land. The tending of these strips was organised by a number of villagers who determined crop and meadow rotation, and which fields should lie fallow. In return, the villagers owed service, rents or taxes to the lord of the manor and the church.

This highly developed organisation of social and financial administration must have been invaluable to the next invaders: the Normans.

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### ***Further Reading***

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