

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 and 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 Roman legions were recalled, 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 various 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 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, archaeological discoveries like the impressive graves at Sutton Hoo and more recently the Staffordshire Hoard show a military society skilled in metal working.

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 priest named Gildas wrote *On the Fall of Britain* in the mid-sixth century; nearly two hundred years later a monk, Bede, produced his *Ecclesiastical History*. King Alfred of Wessex did much to establish written codes of law and it was he who was the power behind the collection of annals that became *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: it drew on earlier materials but was not

compiled until about 892. His grandson 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.

Who was Hocca?

There are no early references to Hook Norton. Place name analysts have deduced that Hook Norton means *the settlement on the slope of Hocca's people*,¹ 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 the name Hocca appears as witnessing or consenting to the grant:

*....Ego Æthelbertus rex Cancie sana mente integroque consilio donacionem meam signo sancte crucis propria manu roborauit confirmauitque. Ego Ægustinus gratia Dei archiepiscopus testis consensiciens libenter subscripsi. Eadbald. Hamigils. Augemund referendarius. **Hocca**. Grafio. Thangil. Pinca. Geddi.*

In associated grants, Hocca is given the title 'comes', that is, 'count'.

*+Ego Athelbertus rex Anglorum hanc donationem meam signo sancte crucis propria manu confirmaui. + Ego Augustinus gratia Dei archiepiscopus libenter subscripsi. + Ego Eadbaldus regis filius faui. + Ego Hamigisilus dux laudaui. + **Ego Hocca comes consensi**. + Ego Augemundus referendarius approbaui. + Ego Graphio comes benedixi. + Ego Tangisilus regis optimas confirmaui. + Ego Pinca consensi. + Ego Geddi corroboraui.*

*Confirmata est hec donatio presentibus testibus, reuerentissimo patre Augustino Dorouernensis ecclesie archiepiscopo primo, Mellito quoque et Iusto Lundonie et Rofensis ecclesie presulibus et religioso famulo Christi Laurentio presbitero, Eadbaldo filio meo, Hamigisilo duce, Augemundo referendario, **Hocca et Graphioni comitibus**, Tangisilo et Pinca et Geddi et*

¹ This translation has more recently been revised again. See “Where was the original Hook Norton?” page 3, which follows in this section. (Ed., 2022).

*Aldhuno regis optimatibus aliisque plurimis diuersarum dignitatum personis.
Actum sane quadragesimo quinto anno regni nostri sub die .v. idus Ianuarii.*²

Unfortunately, these charters are believed to be spurious. Tempting as it is to believe that at least the names of the witnesses might be concurrent with the supposed dates, there is no guarantee of that.

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 unbaptised, so that, being baptized, he might live to inherit an eternal life of future blessedness.*³

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. It's tempting to think that his reeve might have received a gift of land as a minster church was established in Hook Norton. All of which is mere surmise, and unlikely ever to be proven.

² Peter Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography* (Royal Historical Society, 1968), available online as The Electronic Sawyer S2, S3 and S4, at: <http://www.esawyer.org.uk>

³ *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England*, <http://www.pase.ac.uk>, accessed 27 August 2013

Hook Norton, royal vill?

What is proven, however, is that our church has late Anglo-Saxon features. Historian John Blair has pointed specifically to the late Anglo Saxon long and short quoins at the eastern end of the nave. Earlier he had postulated that an original church lay two miles further north than the heart of today's village, close to the iron-age fort at Tadmarton, and that it had later moved with the settlement to the present site. Field names, church land and some early archaeological finds (including a burial mound that has since been ploughed over) supported the Tadmarton Heath 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. Moreover, he stressed that Hook Norton was described as a royal vill, land owned directly by the king, possibly with a royal hall and an important church. Hook Norton, he thinks, might have been part of a royal estate along with land in Tadmarton, Milcombe, Bloxham and Adderbury which was divided into individual manors in the tenth century. Only much later⁴

It was a 12th century historian, John of Worcester, who in his turn was able to draw on texts since lost of the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, who originally described Hook Norton as a royal vill. He was recording a Viking raid from the Danelaw in 913 A.D.:

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.

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 poised uncomfortably close to the Danelaw.

Viking invaders

King Alfred had unified the Saxon kingdoms of the south but had to reach a compromise with the invading Vikings who – like the Saxons themselves – had begun with raids on easy targets. In the ninth century, Alfred defeated a Danish Army but a peace treaty with the Viking chief Guthrum granted the invaders

⁴ “Hook Norton, *regia villa*”, *Oxoniensia*, vol. 51 (1986). For a slightly different reading of Blair’s argument, see “Where was the original Hook Norton?” page 3, which follows in this section (ed., 2022).

independent rule of land roughly east of the old Roman Watlington Street, that ran northeast from London towards Chester.

The Vikings, known as voyagers, raiders and traders, settled on the land and were assimilated in time. Place names still show where they lived; key words from their languages were adopted in the north of Britain; archaeological digs produced evidence of their craftsmanship. They were still pagans.

Viking Treasure in Hook Norton

In the nineteenth century two skeletons and a hoard of 23 Anglo-Saxon silver pennies were discovered in Southrop. Some may 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.*⁵

The coins indicate a date of burial of about 875 or a little later; the burial itself is typical of Viking practice, and was nowhere near the churchyard of St Peter's. There is also refer to the possibility that a silver armband was taken from the grave and sold. The Great Pagan Army of the Danes travelled from Cambridge to Dorset in 875-76; there was a battle at Edington in Wiltshire in 878. So Hook Norton had been on the front line well before the battle of 913.

The Anglo Saxon legacy

By the eleventh century, the Angles, Saxons, Frisians and Jutes had given their adopted country its name, England, and a language, English. The country was divided into shires, divided into 'hundreds' with the power to hold local courts, with military obligations and were administrative units for the royal government. They had introduced a feudal system of farming where large fields were held in common; individual peasants had scattered strips of land in different fields. The tending of these strips was organised by a number of villagers who determined crop and meadow rotation, which fields should lie fallow. There were systematic records, and a clear fiscal system existed.

All of which must have been invaluable to the next invaders: the Normans.

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Sources

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⁵ John Blair and Martin Biddle, "The Hook Norton Hoard of 1848: A Viking burial from Oxfordshire?", *Oxoniensia*, vol. 52 (1987).

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