Factsheet 28

Studying so early a period of history as the Anglo-Saxons presents a number of problems for the researcher. Firstly, many of the sources available are written and therefore quite time consuming to use. Secondly, Devon as an area had not produced the same wealth of archaeological finds for the Anglo-Saxon era as other parts of the country. This makes building a picture of 'everyday life' for Devon quite difficult and assumptions have to be made based on sources available elsewhere.

This sheet will give a brief overview of Devon during the Anglo-Saxon period and suggest sources for the various topics within the curriculum.

The Pre-Saxon World - the Kingdom of Dumnonia

Dumnonia was a British kingdom comprising Devon, Cornwall and parts of Somerset which existed after the Roman occupation of Britain ended. Its name is derived from the Briton tribe of Dumnonii which dominated the area. The name is familiar in the form of Isca Dumnoniorum; the name the Romans gave the settlement of Exeter. Exeter was made the regional centre by the Romans, but after the Roman occupation of Britain ended Exeter ceased to be used as the regional capital. Instead the kings of Dumnonia seem to have ruled from the Tamar area. It is unclear how culturally unified Devon and Cornwall really were before the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, with Cornwall having retained more of its British identity during Roman rule than Devon. We do know that the area had become Christianised by the 6th Century by Welsh, Irish and Breton missionaries. Christian symbols had been found on pottery dating from as early as the mid-fourth Century and there are many early saints connected to Devon and Cornwall. The region used a Brittonic language which evolved into what is now recognised as Cornish. The language was very similar to Welsh and Breton, indeed it is thought that Breton originated from the Westcountry via immigration to the region now known as Brittany. Other Brittonic languages were also carried to the Westcountry from Ireland and survive on some ancient standing stones.

The Coming of the Anglo-Saxons and the Kingdom of Wessex

The Anglo-Saxons began to arrive in Britain during the first half of the 5th Century but their spread into the far south west was slow to begin. The kingdom of Wessex began to move westwards into Devon and Somerset from 658 after Wessex lost its lands to the north of the Thames to the kingdom of Mercia. The forest of Selwood, which boarders Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire, had been the natural frontier to the Wessex kingdom, but the king now sought to move further west in order to expand the kingdom. It is thought that Penselwood, a village on the Somerset boarder which would have stood in the forest, may be the location for the Battle of Peonnum (c.658) fought between the West Saxons under King Cenwalh and the Britons of Somerset. This battle moved the boundary of West Saxon territory as far as the River Parrett. It is disputed as to how quickly the West Saxons moved into Devon. Some sources suggest that the River Parrett remained the boarder of the two kingdoms until around 680, but it has also been suggested that the battle of 658 was actually fought at Pinhoe, making the West Saxon advance into Devon much deeper much sooner. What is known is that in 682 King Centwine won a decisive victory over the Britons of Devon and 'drove the Britons as far as the sea' implying that the county was finally put under Saxon influence as far as the coast. It is thought

that the sea in question was the Atlantic on the north Devon coast. The final stage of Saxon control came in 710 with the victory of King Ine over King Geraint, the last known Dumnonian king. This finally gave the kingdom of Wessex influence in Cornwall.

The Anglo-Saxon influence on Devon

It seems that on the whole the Britons and Anglo-Saxons came to agreements about governance and influence in the region with the region coming slowly under Saxon rule from the 7th Century onwards. The battles mentioned above seem to have been the most significant, although some smaller battles were fought in later years. There are references to tributes and taxes being due to the Wessex kings, suggesting that the South West retained some independence after the Saxons began settling in the region. Bede, writing in 731 states that "although (the British) are partly their own masters, yet they have also been brought partly under the rule of the English". This suggests that there was more a spread of Anglo-Saxon influence, rather than an outright occupation of South Western territory. There are also records of battles being fought between the British and the Anglo-Saxons in 722, 753 and 825, culminating in King Athelstan's expulsion of the British from Exeter c.928, suggesting revolts on the part of the British over the spread of Anglo-Saxon influence and the loss of territory and power.

Place names and language

One of the most obvious ways in which the Anglo-Saxons influenced the South West was through language. The official language of the kingdom of Wessex was English, but the Briton tongue was still spoken. This lingered longest in Cornwall where it was never fully superseded by the English language. It seems that many Devonians learnt to speak English as a way of gaining trade and influence with the newly settled Anglo-Saxons. British names continue to appear in the surviving records for some time, showing that native Britons did have influence within the kingdom. The names fade out, suggesting that British families chose English names for their children as a way of integrating them into the emerging English culture, rather than the British being squeezed out. Inter-cultural marriages between the British and the English would have also influenced this process.

One of the clearest indicators of both Anglo-Saxon influence in the region and the changing language are the place names of Devon and Cornwall. There is a very clear line along the Tamar with names on the Devon side being predominately English-based and those on the Cornish side predominately Brittonic.

Anglo Saxon Governance

The system of governance used by the Anglo-Saxons was so enduring that the terms are very familiar to us today. The parish, hundred and shire are all Anglo-Saxon division which we still use, although in a slightly different format!

The **shires** were created as portions of the kingdom to be governed by a noble as the king's deputy in that area. It is thought that originally each shire was thought of as a 'sub-kingdom' and was governed by someone of the royal dynasty. However, this could have lead to a certain amount of power-building by the minor royals and it appears to have been abandoned as a system. Those governing the shire had major responsibilities in the form of defence and justice

The **hundreds** were divisions of the shires which administered the collection of taxes and the law, holding courts every four weeks. The hundreds appear to have had a royal estate or manor at their heart and often had a minster church as well. The hundreds of Devon changed in size, shape and name throughout the Anglo-Saxon period reflecting the changes in Anglo-Saxon influence and governance.

The **parishes** grew out of the founding of new churches by the initiative of the Anglo-Saxon nobles. The noble who founded the church and held the land would appoint a priest to the

church who took over the religious duties from the priests at the minster church which would have originally served the area. This change required the drawing up of the territories the churches served for taxation purposes. The churches received payments which were know as tithes (usually one tenth of produce for each person, later replaced with monetary payments) and it was necessary to draw up territories so that each population knew who they owed their tithes to. The parishes were very much based upon the boundaries of the estates of the noble who had founded the church and remained so until after the Norman Conquest.

The system created a form of government which is still used, although in a slightly different format, as parish councils and the shire county councils are the direct decedents of this system. Indeed parish tithes and the local courts of the hundreds were with us until the 19th and even the 20th centuries.

Christianity in Devon

The kingdoms of Dumnonia and Wessex were both Christian by the time the Anglo-Saxons began expanding their territory into the South West. The Britons of the South West appear to have been Christian from around the 5th Century while the West Saxons of Wessex adopted Christianity as their official religion around 640. This common ground appears to have been one of the reasons why the occupation of Devon was mostly peaceful rather than battle-littered.

There are a number of early saints associated with Devon and Cornwall with various parishes still baring their names. The most famous of these are St Boniface and St Sidwell with their associations with Crediton and Exeter. There are other saints familiar to us through the place names of Cornwall such as St Ive, St Constantine - a Cornish king, St Erth, St Genny, St Gwithian and St Just. This wealth of saints shows the widespread nature of Christianity in the region before the coming of the Anglo-Saxons. The early Anglo-Saxons were pagan but slowly adopted the Christian faith. It is thought that, as with the formerly pagan Britons, a single god who could cater for all their needs rather than many separate deities appealed to the Anglo-Saxons and convinced them to change their faith. The Anglo-Saxons founded many churches and abbeys, although in some cases it was more a case of re-founding existing institutions on an English basis. There were also a number of 'minsters' founded which acted in a similar way to the modern diocese, administering the religious needs of larger areas. This system predated later divisions in the regions such as the shires, hundreds and parishes and was eventually superseded by them. Some of the minsters are obvious from place names, such as Axminster and Exminster, while others have been lost in time such as those at Hartland, Cullompton and Colyton. Originally the region had only one bishop at Sherborne, created a see in 705, but Crediton became the seat of another bishop to administer Devon and Cornwall in 909. Cornwall did have its own bishop for a time, based at St Germans, but by the time the bishops see was transferred to Exeter in 1050 Cornwall was again administered by the Bishop of Crediton.

There are several churches in Exeter which are known to have Anglo-Saxon roots - St Olaves (Fore Street), St Stephens (High Street), St Pancras (Guildhall Centre), St Sidwells (Sidwell Street) and St Martins (Cathedral Close). There are also several lost churches which were also thought to have very ancient origins - St George which stood on South Street, St Kerrians (a Cornish saint) which stood on North Street and St Mary Major which stood on Cathedral Green, just in front of where the Cathedral stands today. St Mary Major is thought to be the earliest Christian site in the city as pre-Saxon burial sites were found during excavations on the site. It is also the site of the Anglo-Saxon abbey of St Mary & St Peter which stood there before the cathedral was built. St Stephens is known to have an Anglo-Saxon vault and St Olaves was founded by Gytha, mother of King Harold, who lived in the city for a time.

The cultivation of land

The Anglo-Saxons changed the face of Devon with different methods of farming. Firstly they set about clearing the land of trees in order to cultivate more land for crops. They also appear to have introduced the system of open field farming, dividing fields into long strips to be cultivated

by individual families. This system can still be seen at Braunton Great Field in north Devon. It was thought for a long time that the open-field system was never introduced into Devon despite the fact that Braunton was one of the few surviving examples of it. More recent study of documents and of large scale maps has revealed that the Braunton Great Field is indeed very ancient and there is no reason to suppose that it doesn't date from the Anglo-Saxon period.

Further reading

There are dozens of subjects coming from the Anglo-Saxon period such as the status of individuals, work and trade, the emergence of towns and the rural populations of Devon. These are all dealt with in a variety of sources available from the Westcountry Studies Library and the wider Devon Library Service. Here are some suggestions for further sources (Key; WSL - Westcountry Studies Library, ECS - Exeter Central library stack)

Christianity in Devon

- Chanter, John Frederick - Christianity in Devon before A.D 909, 1910, Devonshire Association

- Cook, David - St Boniface; the first European, 2004, Crediton Church Corporation - WSL

- Henderson, Christopher G - The Saxon Minster at Exeter, 1982, Oxford BAR - WSL

- Keep, David - St Boniface and his world, 1979, Paternoster Press - WSL

- Spencer, Ray - A Guide to the Saints of Wales and the Westcountry, 1991, Llanerch Enterprises - WSL

Contemporary accounts of the Anglo-Saxon world

- Aethelweard - The Chronicle of Aethelweard (Ed. A Campbell), 1962, Nelson & Sons - ECS

- Bede - The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation and the Lives of St Cuthbert and the Abbots, 1975, Everyman - ECS

- English Historical Documents vol.1 c.500-1042 (Ed. Dorothy Whitelock), 1979, Eyre Methuen - ECS

- The Exeter Riddle Book, 1979, Penguin (several different translations and editions available) - WSL & ECS

- William of Malmesbury - The Kings Before the Norman Conquest, 1989, Llanerch Enterprises - ECS

Anglo-Saxon Devon

- Alexander, J J. - The Saxon Conquest of Devon, 1914, History Magazine

- Chapman, Geoffrey - A History of Axminster to 1910 - WSL

- Conner, Patrick W - Anglo-Saxon Exeter, 1993, Bodell Press - WSL

- Davidson, J.B - On Some Anglo-Saxon Charters at Exeter - WSL

- Higham, Robert - Making Anglo-Saxon Devon, 2008, Mint Press - available in many Devon library including WSL and EC. Very comprehensive on all aspects of Anglo-Saxon Devon.

- Hoskins, W.G - Two Thousand Years in Exeter (short account), many editions available in both WSL and EC. 2004 Phillimore edition gives the best account.

- Selllman, R.R - Aspects of Devon History, 1985, Devon Books - WSL

- Venn - History of Crediton - WSL

General Anglo-Saxon background

- Page, R.I - Life in Anglo-Saxon England, 1970, Batsford - ECS