

# England on the Eve of the Norman Conquest

By

Geoff Boxell

|                                  |                                   |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Behold! I have learned</i>    | <i>of the loveliest of lands</i>  |
| <i>Edged to the east,</i>        | <i>esteemed amongst men.</i>      |
| <i>Yet few ever fare</i>         | <i>to that far land</i>           |
| <i>Set apart from the sinful</i> | <i>by the strength of God.</i>    |
| <i>Comely that country</i>       | <i>and covered with joys,</i>     |
| <i>So seemly smelling</i>        | <i>of all the earth;</i>          |
| <i>Goodly the island,</i>        | <i>and gracious the Maker</i>     |
| <i>Matchless and mighty,</i>     | <i>who established the world.</i> |
| <i>Proudly parted open</i>       | <i>the portals of heaven</i>      |
| <i>With songs of sweetness</i>   | <i>for blessed souls.</i>         |
| <i>The plain is winsome,</i>     | <i>the woods are green,</i>       |
| <i>Widespread under heaven.</i>  |                                   |

*The Phoenix, Cynewulf*

No one knows exactly when the English first arrived in Britain. Increasingly archaeology is shewing that Germanic tribes were settled along the Saxon shore (East Anglian & south eastern English Channel coast) long before Rome withdrew its Legions around 410AD. These 'English' were likely *foederati*, that is: warriors and their families granted land in exchange for military duties. It is also possible they may have been *laeti*, that is: regular troops with their own weapons and equipment. Both types were common in the late Roman Empire, supplementing the regular Legions. Whatever their terms of service, they were distinctly ethnic Germans. Others, whom the Venerable Bede identified as 'Angles, Saxons and Jutes', later supplemented the resident Germans.

According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a British high king whose title was Vortigen, invited a Jute called Hengest to bring over a war band and fight against the Scots from Ireland and the Picts from what is now Scotland, who had invaded Britain. Hengest and his men came in 449 AD. Others followed and eventually took over the country from their erstwhile employers, even re-naming the country 'England' and calling the native British 'wealas', that is: foreigners.

These Germanic newcomers were warrior farmers. They were freemen and proud of it, each man bearing arms and having his say in the various moots, and the women as free and proud as their men. By 1066 however, the social structure of England had changed.

The Viking wars had destroyed all of the English kingdoms bar Wessex, and the English had found that their kin groupings had not provided them with the strength needed to first resist, and then repel their cousins from Denmark, Sweden and Norway.



*Photo used with permission of St Edmundsbury Borough Council/West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village Trust*

One change the Viking threat had brought about was an increase in urbanisation. The incoming English had scorned the towns and cities the Romano-British had lived in. Eventually London and York re-established themselves as places of importance, but England was predominantly a land of small holdings and hamlets. In 1066 London is thought to have had a population of around fourteen thousand and York around eight thousand. The other towns all had populations of two to four thousand folk. Many of the new towns had developed from the 'burghs' King Alfred the Great and his descendants had established.

A burgh was a settlement and lands enclosed by a ditch, rampart and palisade. In time of trouble the local folk and their livestock withdrew to the burgh for protection. Originally a place of refuge from raiding Viking armies, the later burghs were built as a means of containing the settled Danes. Although England now had more towns than in the past, it is thought that only one in twenty of the population lived in them, the rest remained in their holdings and hamlets.



*Photo Regia Anglorum*

The major change that the Viking wars brought, however, was that each man now acknowledged a lord. In exchange for that lord's protection, both in war and in the courts, the freeman provided armed support and/or money. In addition he provided labour to work the lord's land, or rent in lieu. Although this was a loss of freedom, it did bring greater security. Many of the freemen retained the right to choose their lord, and often a hamlet would contain freemen acknowledging several different lords! One thing the freeman did not give up was his right to speak at the moot.

At the bottom of the social order of England, prior to the Norman Conquest, were the theow, or slaves. In the early days of settlement there had been many slaves, but as they were primarily a result of warfare, and there had been no wars other than border raiding against the Welsh and Scots since Knute had been made King in 1017, their numbers had diminished. In 1066 most of the slaves were men condemned for crime. As there were no prisons, they were kept on the home holdings of powerful thegns or earls who had a force of huscarls large enough to discourage any slaves from running away and becoming outlaws in the woods. Theow had few rights, but still had a legal status and a weregeld - a man's monetary value that had been instituted to prevent blood feuds. Each man and woman had a value according to their rank.

Theow were allowed to retain some of the money that they could make selling surplus produce from their gardens, or from craft items that they had made. This money could then be used to buy their freedom, if they wished. Sometimes a master would free a theow on the understanding that part of his income always went to the owner who had freed him.



*Photo Regia Anglorum*

Above the theow were the serfs. The serfs were unfree and bound to the land they lived on. Thus, if the land was sold, the serfs went with it. Serfs often lived alongside the free and did the same work as the next class up, the cottagers or cottars.

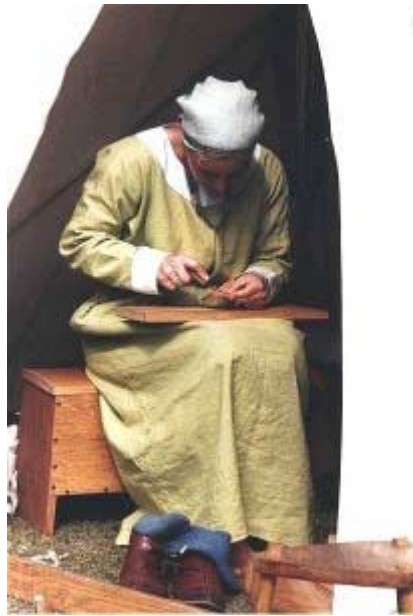
Cottars were free, but tied to do service for the local thegn. The thegn provided their cottages, up to five acres of the village land, their tools and equipment. In return they had to work for him from one to three days a week, and three to four days a week at harvest time. Not all cottars were just labourers. Whilst some spent part of their time doing craftwork as carpenters, weavers, hurdle-makers, bee-keepers or potters, others could be fully occupied as the local blacksmith or miller. Often millers, blacksmiths and other skilled workers would supply goods and services for more than one settlement. Although tied to service, they were free, and if they disliked the thegn enough, they could move to another holding. Cottars paid no rent, but it was a symbol of their freedom that they paid their dues (known as 'sco't') to the church. Next in rank to them stood the ceorls (or sokemen as they were called in the Danelaw area).



*Photo Regia Anglorum*

A ceorl often farmed as much as fifty acres and had the right to fight in the Fyrd (the old English militia). As with the cottar, the thegn, as a rule, had helped the ceorl get started by giving him stock, farm implements and the furniture for his house. The thegn reclaimed these gifts or their

equivalent when the ceorl died, but normally awarded them again to the ceorl's heir to renew the bargain. In return, the ceorl owed a formidable list of duties. These duties could be two days work a week on the thegn's own land, and three days a week for the thegn at harvest and sowing. With the other ceorls he would have had to plough all of the thegn's arable land as well as supplying the seed corn for three acres of it. He also paid rent both in money and kind. Many ceorls prospered, selling their surplus at the local market days. However, to do so he needed a good wife, strong sons and hardworking daughters in order for him to succeed. He could also aspire to become a thegn. Because land could be bought and sold, ceorls could eventually own the five hides of land needed to move up the next rung of the social ladder and become a thegn. A hide was originally an area of land, possibly enough to maintain a freeman and his household. The actual acreage could vary considerably, though the typical hide was 120 acres. Later it became purely a unit of value for tax purposes. The laws of King Knute said: *'If a ceorl prospered, that he possessed fully five hides of his own, a church, a kitchen, a bell and a gated palisade, a seat, special office in the king's hall, then he was henceforth entitled to claim thegn right.'*



*Photo Regia Anglorum*

The labour and payments the local thegn received set him free from working his own landholding, except at harvest time. The thegn paid rent in cash and kind to the lord of whom he held the land. Many thegns could accept as their lord whom they wished. In addition to rent, a thegn performed other duties for his lord, including maintaining bridges and fortifications, handling disputes in the hundred court, which met once a month, and perhaps in the shire court which heard more serious cases twice a year. Above all, the thegn was the man who had to give military service. Thegns, their sons or deputies when they grew old or incapacitated, were the mainstays of the Fyrd. He was only able to perform all these services because most of the work on his land was being done for him by his folk. Where a thegn's holding was rich enough, or

where he owned many holdings, the thegn would employ a reeve to manage the place for him. According to '*Gerefa*', a document that was written as a guide for reeves, these stewards were to uphold both the lord's rights (*hlafordes landriht*) and the customs of the holdings folk (*folces gerihtu*), thus ensuring that the community lived prosperously and harmoniously.

Originally a thegn was a man holding five hides of land and able to equip himself for the Fyrd. As time went by, some thegns had less than five hides of land, whereas others had thousands.



*Photo used with permission of St Edmundsbury Borough Council/West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village Trust*

Above the thegns, both greater and lesser, were the earls. In 1066 there were six earldoms. Although the earl would inevitably own land in the earldom, much of the land that financed his stewardship of the area came from land within the earldom owned by the king. Earldoms were not hereditary and the king, in consultation with the Witan, appointed the earls. The Witan was the embryo parliament that advised the king in his lifetime and appointed his successor when he died, choosing who would be king from the Æþelings (princes of the blood royal), selecting the one most suitable. There was no formal election to the Witan and its regular members were 'members *ex officio*' but, in theory, any freeman could attend and speak his mind.

The size and composition of an earldom could change according to the king's needs. Earls were the king's representatives in the area they ruled. They were responsible for seeing that the thegns performed the various duties their rank demanded; they gathered the geld, that is tax; they marshalled and led the local Fyrd in times of danger. If they did not perform, they were replaced! In fact kings could also be replaced.

Kings owned their own land. Some of the revenue came straight to them, whilst other revenue went to the earls to enable them to rule on the king's behalf. The king, in consultation with the Witan, could call for a geld to be made. But he was not an absolute ruler and he reigned by the will of the people. The great churchman Ælfric's Easter Sunday homily reminded all Englishmen that: '*No man can make himself king, but the people have the choice to chose as king whom they will; but after he is consecrated as king, he has dominion over the people, and they cannot shake his yoke from their necks.*' However, a king who ignored the conventions risked rebellion as King Æþelræd Unræd had found out.

None of the ranks in English society at the time could claim the absolute ownership of land. The ceorls '*held their land of*' the thegns, the thegns held it of an earl or the church or directly from the King, and the King held it all of God's grace. In this social order all, without exception, owed duties to those above and below them.



Although society was not democratic in the 21<sup>ST</sup> century sense, in theory all freemen/women could bring matters to the attention of the king, who was obliged to consider their opinions and requests.

The lowest level of social organisation was the tything. A tything was, in theory, a group of ten families, though often it was all the families in a holding. Tythings were responsible for the behaviour of the families of which they were comprised. A representative of each family attended a Tything Moot, where they would manage the discipline and business affairs of the families involved. If they had a problem they could not solve, the matter was taken to the Hundred Moot. A Hundred was a divisional unit of the shire consisting of 100 hides. In the Danelaw the unit was a 'wapontake'. Matters that were unresolved at the Hundred Moot, or matters of a greater importance, were dealt with at the Shire Moot, where the Earl or his representative, the Shire Reeve, held the chair. The highest Moot of all was the Witan.



*Photo used with permission of St Edmundsbury Borough Council/West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village Trust*

With little industry, wealth came from the land. On a holding the land was farmed as one large open field; and it was ploughed in strips, conventionally ten times as long as they were wide, because of the time, trouble and the wasted headland caused in turning a plough with a team of eight oxen. These strips of arable land were cropped on a three-year rotation. Although each ceorl planted and harvested his own crop on the amount of land he held, he would be allotted different ploughlands by drawing lots each year at an autumn Tything Moot. The pasture for sheep and cattle was held in common and it is thought so were the herds themselves. Everyone's land, including the thegn's, was mixed up together. The only unmixed lands were the yards and gardens round the houses where each family grew its fruit and vegetables and kept its hens and geese. Click here to see a picture on the [3 field crop rotation](#) system.

The houses were wooden framed, usually using oak or chestnut. The gaps between the framing were filled with walls of wattle hurdles that were then daubed with clay. A thegn's house was not much grander than the rest, but it was larger.



*Photo used with permission of St Edmundsbury Borough Council/West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village Trust*

Custom dictated that the thegn had to accommodate anyone who came to the area on lawful business. To prove that they were coming on lawful business, strangers were required to stop at the fence surrounding the holding's land and sound a horn, and thus advise the folk that they were coming openly. In fact the thegn's house had to provide shelter to the whole community if any danger threatened. To that end, it had a strong palisade, and among the buildings that clustered round it were the priest's house and the church.

The English did have stone buildings where the material was freely available, or where prestige was important. Some of the houses in the towns had the lower parts made of stone with the upper stories made of wood.

Whilst most churches were wooden, many were of stone and built in a distinctive style, often with a square tower.



*The Saxon church of St Martins, Wareham, Dorset*

*Photo by Geoff Boxell*

Although church services would be in Latin, it was usual for the sermon and readings from Scripture to be in English. Unlike most countries in Europe, the English had translated the Scriptures, the lives of saints and many other religious works into the everyday English they spoke, thus allowing them to be understood.

The local priest was expected to do more than just perform the offices of the church and pastor his flock. In the tract '*Episcopus*', thought to have been written by Bishop Wulfstan of Worcester, the secular duties of Bishops and priests were laid out. The priest was to: '*busy himself in the active pursuit of justice in social dealings.*' Included in this pursuit of justice, the priest was to ensure that theows and serfs were not over worked and that all weights and measures used were correct.

The Church had many festivals, which were celebrated by all. In addition there were some pagan festivals that had survived despite the Church. There was Christmas and the winter solstice, when they celebrated for twelve days. Easter and May Day, Whitsun, Rogation Day and Lammas. Add to these the harvest festival, sowing festival, ploughing festival and feasts on finishing haystacks and completion of wood gathering for winter. In addition there would have been a feast day of the saint to whom the local church was dedicated, plus any betrothals,



weddings and birthdays that came along. The English were famed for brewing great quantities of ale, and they were uproarious drinkers. When a couple got married, it was usual for the two families involved to live and party together for a lunar month, drinking a special ale boosted with honey. From this practice we get the term 'honeymoon'.



*Photo Regia Anglorum*

Whilst the heroic poetry of the English has an underlying melancholy, the English were not a particularly solemn people; given their contemporary reputation for drinking large amounts of ale and mead this is not surprising. Not much survives of their sense of humour, but some of the riddles that were written down are quite funny and the odd one or two quite vulgar! In 1066 adultery was illegal, and the penalty for rape was castration, which helped to prevent illicit relationships, but there were as many, if not more, 'hand fast' marriages as church blessed ones. Whilst a church marriage took a lot of breaking, this was not the case with 'hand fast' marriages, and laws were set out to ensure equal division of property and appropriate care of the children when the couple split.

As well as love and lust, there were other forms of entertainment. Out of doors they played various kinds of football, often against the neighbouring hamlets. There is also evidence that they played a game with a bat and ball that evolved in later years into cricket and rounders. Indoors they played draughts or games similar to Nine Man Morris. The thegns and above often played chess.

All levels of society hunted and fished through necessity, but both have always had an element of sport. In those days most rivers were teeming with fish and it was common for water mills to pay their geld with hundreds or even thousands of eels. Although the forest was full of game the deer were strictly the king's or earl's prerogative, the penalties for poaching were fearsome, and

archery was discouraged among the lower classes.

In 1066, before the Normans arrived, England was the wealthiest, most stable nation in Europe and it had the strongest currency, based on the silver penny. These coins were strictly regulated at a national level to ensure their purity. England also had the most efficient tax gathering system, and sufficient local input to ensure that it was assessed fairly. It had a strong law code that was enforced at local and national moots. Land transfers were documented and inviolate. To their credit, the English had continued to follow the old Germanic code of honouring women and given them equal rights to hold and own land and possessions and even start legal proceedings.



*Photo Regia Anglorum*

England was also very cultured. It was renowned for its arts and crafts, which were known and valued all over western Europe, especially the illumination of manuscripts, embroidery and gold and silver work; and there was a lively tradition of quality prose and verse in both English and Latin.



*Photo Regia Anglorum*

England in 1066 was experiencing a golden age. It was to be shattered on 14 October by the death of Harold Godwinson, last king of the English, on Senlac Ridge outside Hastings.



*Photo Regia Anglorum*

© 2001 Wendlewulf Productions & author GR Boxell. This paper may be reproduced for educational purposes provided it is copied in full, including the following:

This paper is taken from the CD-ROM 1066 & the Norman Conquest made by Wendlewulf Productions.

Please visit <http://www.wendlewulf.co.nz> for more information on the contents and how to purchase the CD-ROM or any of the other products available from wendlewulf.