



HISTORY COURSE

The Story of Old English

10 Chapters

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The Story of Old English

Course 1 · Chapter 1 · Before English

English did not begin in an empty island. When the first speakers of what became Old English arrived, people in Britain already spoke other languages, and some of those languages are still spoken today. This chapter looks at which ones, and at the few traces they left in English.

The story in one box

Before about 450, the main languages of Roman Britain were Common Brittonic, a Celtic language, and Latin. Brittonic did not vanish: it became Welsh, Cornish, Breton and Cumbric. Over several centuries Old English replaced Brittonic across most of what is now England. Brittonic survives in English mainly as place names.

Two families of Celtic

The Celtic languages are one family, and the family divides into two main branches that matter for Britain and Ireland. According to Wikipedia's *Celtic languages* article:

Branch	Languages (living, or lost)	Also called
Brittonic	Welsh, Cornish, Breton; the lost Cumbric; possibly Pictish	P-Celtic
Goidelic	Irish, Manx, Scottish Gaelic	Q-Celtic

This course is about the Brittonic branch, because that is what was spoken across most of Britain when the English arrived. Irish and Scottish Gaelic belong to the other branch and are not descended from Brittonic. The article also says the Isle of Man "may have spoken a Brythonic language" before Goidelic speakers arrived in the 9th century.

Common Brittonic

According to Wikipedia's *Common Brittonic* article, this was the language of the Celtic Britons, spoken in Britain and in Brittany from about the 6th century BC to about the middle of the 6th century AD. It is a **reconstructed** language: no texts in it survive. The evidence is a few

inscriptions, such as the Bath curse tablets, and the place names and personal names recorded in Roman times.

Watch out

"Celtic" does not mean one nation or one language. Common Brittonic is a reconstruction from later languages and a few scraps of evidence, not a language we can read. Reading *The Story of Old English* does not need any Welsh or Cornish.

Latin arrives

Roman Britain lasted, according to Wikipedia's *Roman Britain* article, from AD 43 to about 410. The *Common Brittonic* article says that after the conquest in AD 43, Latin competed with Brittonic, especially in towns, and that Brittonic borrowed many Latin words, particularly church and Christian vocabulary. I did not find in the pages I read how many people spoke Latin, or whether country people did, so this chapter does not give a figure. That is an open question, not something I can fill from memory.

The Romans leave

Wikipedia's *End of Roman rule in Britain* article gives several dates rather than one, and it says that modern scholarship generally rejects an abrupt end:

Date	What the article says
383	Magnus Maximus takes troops from northern and western Britain; the last year with evidence of a Roman presence there
407	Constantine III takes the remaining mobile soldiers to Gaul
409 to 410	Romano-Britons expel Constantine's magistrates
410	A rescript from the Emperor Honorius tells British communities to look to their own defence (the article notes a small chance it was meant for southern Italy)

The same article says the decades after 410 "saw the collapse of urban life and the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain". That is the bridge to Chapter 2 of this course.

Where the Brittonic languages went

The *Common Brittonic* article says that by the 6th century AD the language had divided into dialects that became Old Welsh (in Wales), Old Cornish (in Cornwall), Old Breton (in Brittany) and Cumbric (in northern England and southern Scotland). Pictish, spoken in northern Scotland, may also have descended from it, though the article records a scholar's view that the evidence does not clearly separate Pictish from Brittonic.

Language	Where	What happened (per the article)
Welsh	Wales	Survived to the present
Breton	Brittany	Survived to the present
Cornish	Cornwall	Died out in the 1700s; since revived
Cumbric	Northern England, southern Scotland	Disappeared in the 12th century
Pictish	Northern Scotland	Died out around the 12th or 13th century

The article says that over the following three centuries Brittonic was replaced by Old English across most of modern England. It does not give a cause. How and why this happened is a question for Chapter 2.

What Brittonic left in English

The same article says Brittonic-derived place names are common, especially in the West Country. Its examples:

Name	Meaning given
Avon	"river"
Thames	"dark"

Name	Meaning given
Dover	"water(s)"
Kent	"border"
tor, combe	Brittonic words found in Devon place names
Derwentwater	a hybrid name (Brittonic and English parts)

The article also says Cumbric and Pictish now survive only as loanwords in English, Scots and Scottish Gaelic. It says little about individual Celtic words in everyday English beyond place names, and I have not looked for more.

A link to the Old English Reading course

The Old English texts call the Britons **Walas**; you can see the word in the Chronicle annals of Old English Reading 1, Chapter 4. I read that as the word behind the modern names *Wales* and *Welsh*, but that is my own knowledge, not something I checked in a source for this chapter.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Common Brittonic	The reconstructed ancestor of Welsh, Cornish, Breton and Cumbric
Brittonic	The branch of Celtic that includes Common Brittonic and its descendants
Goidelic	The other British and Irish branch: Irish, Manx, Scottish Gaelic
Cumbric	A lost Brittonic language of northern England and southern Scotland
Pictish	The language of the Picts in northern Scotland; its exact relation to Brittonic is debated
Rescript	An emperor's written reply to a request or petition



Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. Which two languages does Wikipedia say were the main ones of Roman Britain?

▼ Show answer

Common Brittonic (a Celtic language) and Latin.

2. Is Cornish a dialect of English?

▼ Show answer

No. It is a Brittonic Celtic language, a descendant of Common Brittonic. It died out in the 1700s and has been revived.

3. Which branch of Celtic are Irish and Scottish Gaelic in?

▼ Show answer

Goidelic (also called Q-Celtic), not Brittonic.

4. Put in order: Constantine III takes soldiers to Gaul; Honorius's rescript; Magnus Maximus takes troops from the north and west.

▼ Show answer

Magnus Maximus (383), Constantine III (407), the rescript of Honorius (410).

5. Why can we not read Common Brittonic texts?

▼ Show answer

No texts in it survive. It is reconstructed from later languages, a few inscriptions and Roman-era place and personal names.

6. What kind of Latin words did Brittonic borrow most, according to the article?

▼ Show answer

7. Name two English place names that come from Brittonic, and what they mean.

▼ Show answer

For example **Avon** ("river") and **Thames** ("dark"); also **Dover** ("water(s)") and **Kent** ("border").

8. The article says 410 is often cited as the end of Roman rule. What does modern scholarship generally say?

▼ Show answer

It rejects an abrupt end and sees a gradual decline from the 4th to the 6th centuries.

Note on sources

This chapter uses three Wikipedia articles: *Common Brittonic* (the dates, the descendants, the Latin borrowings and the place names), *End of Roman rule in Britain* (the dates 383, 407, 409 to 410, and the scholarship remark) and *Celtic languages* (the two branches and the Isle of Man remark). I read the first 100,000 characters of *Celtic languages* and the first 100,000 of *Roman Britain*, which gives only the dates 43 and about 410 and says nothing on languages. I did not read a scholarly source on how widely Latin was spoken, and I did not find a source for how the Britons were replaced. The note about **Walas** is mine and unverified. The appendix timeline and map pages come after Chapter 10.

Coming up in Chapter 2: The Settlers. Who the Angles, Saxons and Jutes were, what the Chronicle says about 449, and what the sources say about how Old English spread.

The Story of Old English

Course 1 · Chapter 2 · The Settlers

Old English came to Britain with Germanic-speaking settlers in the fifth century. The old story says they arrived in one great invasion. The sources are more mixed than that, and scholars still disagree about how many people came. This chapter sets out what the sources say and where they differ.

The story in one box

Germanic speakers, called Angles, Saxons and Jutes by the later writer Bede, settled in Britain from the fifth century as the Roman system collapsed. The date 449 comes from later tradition. Archaeology and genetics show real migration, but scholars disagree about its scale, and the old "invasion" picture is questioned.

Who were they?

According to Wikipedia's *Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain* article, the settlers were Germanic speakers from the continent, and their language, Old English, was closely related to Old Frisian. The sources name Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians, but the article treats those names with caution. It says early arrivals were probably soldiers recruited by the Roman administration, and that larger numbers came in the early fifth century.

What the old sources say

No one wrote a full account of the settlement at the time. The sources come later, and the article lists them:

Source	Date (as given)	What it says (per the article)
<i>Chronica Gallica</i> of 452	reports 409 or 410, and 441	Saxon raids in 409 or 410; for 441, British provinces handed to the rule of the Saxons

Source	Date (as given)	What it says (per the article)
Gildas, <i>De Excidio</i>	probably early 6th century	The earliest account of Saxon settlement: Saxon <i>foederati</i> invited by a Romano-British "proud tyrant", a revolt over unpaid supplies, and a later British victory at Badon
Procopius	6th century	Britain settled by Angles, Frisians and Britons, each with its own king; no Saxons or Jutes mentioned
Bede	8th century	Builds on Gildas and adds Hengist and Horsa, Vortigern, and three peoples: Angles, Saxons and Jutes; the article calls his account "semi-mythical"

Wikipedia's *Anglo-Saxons* article adds that Bede dated the invitation to 450 to 455, while the *Historia Brittonum* gives 428 and the *Chronica Gallica* gives 441, and that archaeology points earlier. It notes the historian Guy Halsall's suggestion that Gildas has been misread and the invitation may date from the late fourth century. So 449 is not the only date, and scholars disagree on it.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle gives a version for the year 449. A passage from it is read line by line in Old English Reading 1, Chapter 5 (the Chronicle text as printed on Wikisource, Plummer's 1892 edition). In it the English come from three peoples of Germany. I did not read the settlement article's discussion of the Chronicle, and the part I read did not mention the date 449.

Watch out

The date 449 is the traditional one in the Chronicle, not a fixed fact. A reader who sees "449" in a textbook is looking at a convention. The sources above disagree, and Gildas, the earliest writer, did not describe the arrival as the start of a migration.

The old picture, and the doubts

The *Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain* article describes the traditional account as a single coordinated invasion after Roman rule ended (it gives 411), followed by conflict between pagan Anglo-Saxon and Christian Celtic kingdoms, with the Britons displaced or converted. It says modern scholars see this as questionable.

What archaeology shows

- Roman material culture collapsed around 400.
- Cremation urnfields, furnished burials, Germanic-style metalwork and sunken-featured buildings suggest migration from north-western Germany.
- But field systems and settlement patterns show continuity with Romano-British land use.
- Isotope and skeletal studies at sites such as West Heslerton and Eastbourne suggest the migrants included men and women, and mixed cemeteries suggest intermarriage.

What genetics shows, and what is disputed

A 2022 study of 460 ancient genomes, described in the same article, found that 25 to 47 percent of the DNA of present-day English people comes from early medieval arrivals from northern Europe. In eastern England, early medieval individuals derived up to 76 percent of their ancestry from that population. One of the study's authors, Duncan Sayer, is quoted as saying "You can't argue with [mass migration] any more". Susan Oosthuizen disputed this, arguing that the study did not show unusual migration in the fifth and sixth centuries. The article also notes that some scholars question whether genetic patterns can be equated with ethnic or cultural identity.

Question	Range or view given
How many migrants?	Estimates run from 20,000 to 200,000; one view puts them at 10 to 20 percent of the population
Mass migration or elite takeover?	Scholars now broadly agree on mass migration in the south-east and elite dominance in the north and west; genetic data is still interpreted differently
Did Britons survive?	Yes: the article cites intermarriage, and some royal names that are British, such as Cerdic, who may have been a native Briton

Why the language changed

The same article says Old English has few Brittonic loanwords, and that most English place names are Old English or Old Norse, with Brittonic names common in the west and north but rare in the south-east. It says later law codes show the Britons had lower status, and that this

may have encouraged assimilation. It also records that the last Brittonic-named Wessex king died in 689. The Brittonic loanwords and place names are the traces of Chapter 1 of this course.

Wikipedia's *Anglo-Saxons* article says Old English supplies over 80 percent of everyday English words, though under 26 percent of the total vocabulary.

"Anglo-Saxon" and "English"

The *Anglo-Saxons* article says "Anglo-Saxon" is a modern scholarly compound, first recorded by continental scholars in the mid-eighth century. Bede preferred "Angles" or "English", and that term became dominant. Alfred took the title *Anglosaxonum Rex* in the late 880s, and Irish and Welsh speakers went on calling the English "Saxons".

Words to know

Term	Meaning
<i>foederati</i>	Soldiers settled in a region under an agreement with the Roman government (my gloss of the word the article uses)
Isotope study	A test on bones or teeth that can show where a person grew up
Old Frisian	The closest relative of Old English among the surviving Germanic languages (per the article)
<i>Anglosaxonum Rex</i>	"King of the Anglo-Saxons", Alfred's title in the late 880s



Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. Which three peoples did Bede name?

▼ Show answer

| Angles, Saxons and Jutes.

2. Who is the earliest writer the article names for the Saxon settlement?

▼ Show answer

Gildas, in *De Excidio*, probably early in the sixth century.

3. Why is 449 only a traditional date?

▼ Show answer

The sources disagree: Bede gives 450 to 455, the *Historia Brittonum* 428, the *Chronica Gallica* 441, and archaeology points earlier.

4. Which language is the closest relative of Old English, according to the article?

▼ Show answer

Old Frisian.

5. What did the 2022 study of 460 ancient genomes find?

▼ Show answer

That 25 to 47 percent of present-day English DNA comes from early medieval arrivals from northern Europe, up to 76 percent in eastern England; another scholar disputed what it shows about the fifth and sixth centuries.

6. What does the evidence of mixed cemeteries suggest?

▼ Show answer

Intermarriage between migrants and local people.

7. Is Old English full of Brittonic loanwords?

▼ Show answer

No: the article says it has few, and that most English place names are Old English or Old Norse.

8. What does the 80 percent figure mean?

▼ Show answer

Old English supplies over 80 percent of everyday English words, though under 26 percent of the total vocabulary.

Note on sources

This chapter draws on Wikipedia's *Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain* and *Anglo-Saxons* articles, of which I read the first 100,000 characters each (the settlement article is about 225,000 characters long and the other about 301,000). The Chronicle's own account is not quoted here; Old English Reading 1, Chapter 5 reads it. I did not read the section of the *Anglo-Saxons* article on the language itself, nor any scholarly paper, so the genetic and archaeological results are as the articles report them. The gloss of *foederati* and the explanation of an isotope study are mine and unverified. I have added no dates or numbers of my own.

Coming up in Chapter 3: Four Dialects. Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon and Kentish: where each was spoken, how they differed, and why most surviving texts are in West Saxon.

The Story of Old English

Course 1 · Chapter 3 · Four Dialects

There was never one "Old English". The settlers of Chapter 2 founded separate kingdoms, and each had its own way of speaking. The record that survives is lopsided: one dialect is read far more than the others, and the reason is partly history and partly accident.

The story in one box

Wikipedia names four main dialects of Old English: Northumbrian, Mercian, Kentish and West Saxon. Northumbrian and Mercian together are called Anglian. Most surviving texts are in West Saxon, because Alfred's Wessex became the centre of government and writing, and Viking raids and later centralisation left less written record of the others.

The four dialects

According to Wikipedia's *Old English* article, each dialect was tied to an independent kingdom:

Dialect	Kingdom	Where spoken (per the article)	Group
Northumbrian	Northumbria	North of the Humber	Anglian
Mercian	Mercia	Between the Humber and the Thames	Anglian
West Saxon	Wessex	South and south-west of the Thames	Saxon (my label; the article only names the Anglian pair)
Kentish	Kent	A small area south-east of the Thames	Jutish (the speakers were Jutes from Jutland, per the article)

The separate articles on each dialect give more detail. Northumbrian was spoken in the Anglian kingdom of Northumbria, from the Humber to the Firth of Forth. Mercian covered roughly the English Midlands, from the border of East Anglia west to Offa's Dyke, north to Staffordshire, and south to Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. Kentish covered Kent, Surrey, Sussex, southern

Hampshire and the Isle of Wight; Bede called the settlers there Jutes, though the article says modern historians are more sceptical of a separate Jutish identity.

These regions will also be drawn on the Map page in the appendix.

What survives in each

Dialect	Texts the articles name
Northumbrian	Cædmon's Hymn (composed 658 to 680); Bede's Death Song (8th century); the Ruthwell Cross runic inscription (c. 750, heavily debated because the stone is weathered); the Lindisfarne Gospels gloss (a translation made around 970 of Latin Gospels written c. 715); the Leiden Riddle (9th century)
Mercian	The Vespasian Psalter gloss (around 850), which includes six Mercian hymns; the Old English Martyrology, probably compiled in Mercia in the second half of the 9th century
Kentish	The Old Kentish Glosses (the principal evidence); charters; law codes in <i>Textus Roffensis</i> , which are early 12th-century copies of older laws, with spellings modernised and standardised
West Saxon	Most of the surviving record; the rest of this chapter explains why

Cædmon's Hymn, the first poem in Old English Reading 1, Chapter 3, is a Northumbrian text, and that chapter notes the Northumbrian spellings. The Wikipedia *Old English* article calls Kentish the dialect with the thinnest literary record.

How different were they?

The articles give only a few examples, and they are small spelling and sound differences. According to the *Old English* article:

- Northumbrian kept a vowel combination that merged with another in the other dialects.
- West Saxon and Kentish had merged two vowel sounds before the first written prose.
- Mercian and Northumbrian texts spelled one sound with **rg** where West Saxon wrote **ri**, as in **herian**.

The *Mercian dialect* article gives two more: West Saxon final **-c** corresponds to Mercian **-h** (West Saxon **ic**, Mercian **ih**, "I"), and some Mercian pronouns kept a final **-k**, as in **mec** "me". The Kentish article says Kentish and West Saxon were very similar, with many identical words, and concludes they were mutually intelligible. I did not find how well speakers of the other dialects understood each other.

Why West Saxon dominates the record

The *Old English* article gives the chain of events:

1. In the 9th century the Vikings overran Northumbria south of the Tyne and most of Mercia.
2. The surviving part of Mercia and all of Kent were then absorbed into Wessex under Alfred the Great.
3. After Alfred's unification, Early West Saxon became the language of government and the basis for literature and religious translations.
4. Centralisation and Viking destruction left relatively little written record of the other dialects.

The article adds that some Mercian texts were still written, and that Mercian influence appears in some of Alfred's translations, many of which were made by Mercian scholars. Alfred's reign is the subject of Chapter 6.

Early and Late West Saxon

The article says a later standard, Late West Saxon, from the late 10th century, shares a region with Early West Saxon but did not descend directly from it. It gives the example of a diphthong that became one vowel in Early West Saxon and a different one in Late West Saxon. It records that Hogg suggested the names "Alfredian Saxon" and "Æthelwoldian Saxon" so that readers would not assume the two stages follow each other in time. Under Æthelwold of Winchester the Late West Saxon standard kept its prestige until the Norman Conquest.

This matters for readers of the other courses. Old English Grammar 1, Chapter 1 says most surviving texts follow a written standard based on Late West Saxon, and teaches that standard. That is a convenience, not a claim that West Saxon was the "real" Old English.

Watch out

Is West Saxon the ancestor of Modern English? The *Old English* article says the standard forms of Middle and Modern English descend from Mercian rather than West Saxon, and that Scots developed from Northumbrian, but it tags both claims "citation needed". The *Northumbrian Old English* article says the same of Scots, and says Standard English traces its origins to Mercian. I would treat these as plausible but not established by what I read; Chapter 10 returns to the question.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Anglian	Northumbrian and Mercian together
Gloss	A translation or note written between the lines of a Latin manuscript
Psalter	A book of the Psalms
Charter	A written grant or legal record, often of land
Standard	A form of the language used across many writers and places

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. Name the four main dialects of Old English.

▼ Show answer

Northumbrian, Mercian, Kentish and West Saxon.

2. Which two are called Anglian?

▼ Show answer

Northumbrian and Mercian.

3. Which river divided Northumbrian from Mercian, and which divided Mercian from West Saxon?

▼ Show answer

The Humber (Northumbrian to the north, Mercian to the south), and the Thames (Mercian to the north, West Saxon to the south and south-west).

4. Cædmon's Hymn is in which dialect?

▼ Show answer

Northumbrian.

5. Why do most surviving Old English texts come from one dialect?

▼ Show answer

After the Viking raids Alfred's Wessex absorbed Kent and the rest of Mercia, West Saxon became the language of government and writing, and centralisation and Viking destruction left little written record of the others.

6. What is the difference between a gloss and a translation made as a separate book?

▼ Show answer

A gloss is written between the lines of a Latin manuscript, as in the Vespasian Psalter and the Lindisfarne Gospels, rather than being a separate text.

7. The article says Mercian influence appears in Alfred's translations. Why?

▼ Show answer

Many of the translations were made by Mercian scholars.

8. What did the articles I read say about which dialect Modern English descends from, and how firm is it?

▼ Show answer

Mercian for Standard English and Northumbrian for Scots, but the *Old English* article marks both claims "citation needed", so they are not firmly established in what I read.

Note on sources

This chapter uses four Wikipedia articles: *Old English* (the dialect regions, the chain of events, the Late West Saxon note, the first 100,000 of about 208,000 characters), *Mercian dialect*, *Northumbrian Old English* and *Kentish dialect (Old English)*, each as returned by the page tool. I did not read the later parts of the *Old English* article, any phonology beyond the examples quoted, or any scholarly source on how well speakers understood each other. The gloss of "gloss", "psalter", "charter" and "standard" is mine. The map page is not yet written; Chapter 10 returns to the question of what Modern English descends from.

Coming up in Chapter 4: Writing It Down. Runes, the Latin alphabet, and the new letters þ, ð, æ and ƿ.

The Story of Old English

Course 1 · Chapter 4 · Writing It Down

The settlers of Chapters 2 and 3 could write before they could write books. This chapter follows how Old English was first scratched in runes, then written in a Latin alphabet adapted for the purpose, and where the odd letters of Old English manuscripts came from.

The story in one box

Old English was first written in a runic alphabet, probably from the fifth century. The Christian mission of 597 brought the Latin alphabet, which by the eighth century had overtaken the runes. Scribes took letters such as **þ** and **ƿ** from the runes, and modified others such as **æ** and **ð** from Latin letters, to write sounds Latin had no letters for.

Runes

According to Wikipedia's *Anglo-Saxon runes* article, the origin of the Anglo-Frisian runic row is unknown. One theory holds that it developed in Frisia and spread to Britain. The other holds that runes reached Britain from the mainland, were modified there, and were then exported to Frisia. The early row was nearly identical to the older continental row (the Elder Futhark), except that the single *a* rune split into three variants. The article says the Old English row was a 28-type development of the 24-type Elder Futhark, and that in the ninth century it grew to a 33-type row. The Anglo-Saxon row is called the **futhorc**.

The article says use likely began in the fifth century in Britain and Frisia. It names early examples: the Undley bracteate (possibly the earliest instance of the **ōs** rune), the Spong Hill urns (fifth century) and the Kantens combcase (early fifth century).

Object	Date (per the article)	Note
Franks Casket	8th century	Mixes runes and Latin on one object
St Cuthbert's coffin	dated 698	Three Evangelist names are in Latin written in runes; the fourth is in Roman script

Object	Date (per the article)	Note
Ruthwell Cross	8th century	The inscription may be partly a modern reconstruction
Seax of Beagnoth (Thames scramasax)	9th century	The only complete alphabet among the inscriptions

The Wikipedia *Old English* article adds that limited runic inscriptions date from the fifth to seventh centuries, and that the oldest coherent runic texts are from the early eighth century.

The Latin alphabet arrives

The article on the Old English Latin alphabet says the alphabet came back to Britain with the Christian mission of 597, and that the earliest Latin-script Old English appears in law codes such as the Law of Æthelberht (616). The *Anglo-Saxon runes* article says that from the seventh-century Christianisation runic writing became closely tied to Latin scriptoria, and that by the eighth century the Latin alphabet had overtaken the runes. It says runes disappeared from Frisia around the eighth century and were very rare by the Norman Conquest of 1066.

The *Old English* article gives a slightly different wording: the Latin alphabet was introduced in the seventh century, and from around the eighth century it replaced the runic system. The sources agree on the sequence and differ a little on how to date it.

The Old English Latin alphabet article also records the styles of handwriting. A half-uncial script arrived with the Hiberno-Scottish mission in the eighth century. It was later replaced by the cursive insular script, which lasted until the late twelfth century.

The extra letters

Latin had no letters for several Old English sounds, so scribes added some. The article says:

Letter	Name	Source (per the article)	Sound given
æ	ash	A modified Latin letter	the vowel /æ/

Letter	Name	Source (per the article)	Sound given
ð	eth	Altered from the Latin d	/θ/ or [ð]
þ	thorn	Borrowed from the runic futhorc	(no sound given in the table)
ƿ	wynn	A runic borrowing	/w/

The runes themselves are named **ðorn (þorn)** and **wyn (wynn)**, and the *Anglo-Saxon runes* article says "þorn and pynn came to be used as extensions of the Latin alphabet".

The Old English Latin alphabet article also lists a few shorthand marks: a Tironian-style sign 7 for "and", and a crossed thorn **þ** for **þæt**. You can see the crossed thorn in Old English Reading 1, Chapter 5, where the Chronicle text prints it. The article says macrons for long vowels were rarely used, and occasionally served as nasal marks, which is why the long marks in this and the other courses are an editor's addition (see Old English Grammar 1, Chapter 1).

Letters not used

The same article says Q and Z were essentially unused except in foreign names, J had not yet come into use, and K was used by some writers but not others. It does not discuss V.

What happened next

The article says W gained use under Norman influence, as seen at the end of the Peterborough Chronicle, though it was still a ligature rather than a full letter. It adds that Carolingian minuscule and Old French spelling conventions led to Middle English. It does not describe **p** being replaced by *w* or **þ** becoming *th*, so I do not state those changes here.

Watch out

"Rune" simply names the letters of these old Germanic alphabets; I would not read a mysterious meaning into the word (that remark is mine, not the articles'). Also, the number of runes varies by period and article: the *Anglo-Saxon runes* article mentions 26 for the early row, a 28-type row, and 33 by the ninth century. Treat any single number as true of one date only.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Futhorc	The Anglo-Saxon runic alphabet, named after its first letters
Elder Futhark	The older 24-letter runic alphabet it developed from
Scriptorium (plural scriptoria)	A room or workshop in a monastery where manuscripts were copied
Insular script	The style of handwriting used in Britain and Ireland in this period
Ligature	Two letters joined into one shape

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. What is the Anglo-Saxon runic alphabet called?

▼ Show answer

| The futhorc.

2. Name two letters that came from the runes.

▼ Show answer

| þ (thorn) and ƿ (wynn).

3. Which extra letter was altered from a Latin d?

▼ Show answer

| ð (eth).

4. Which mission brought the Latin alphabet back to Britain, according to the article?

▼ Show answer

The Christian mission of 597.

5. What is the Franks Casket remarkable for?

▼ Show answer

It mixes runes and Latin on one object.

6. Why are long marks over vowels an editor's addition?

▼ Show answer

Scribes rarely used macrons for long vowels in the manuscripts.

7. What did the crossed thorn **þ** stand for?

▼ Show answer

The word **þæt** ("that").

8. Which letters were essentially unused except in foreign names?

▼ Show answer

Q and Z (J had not come into use, and K was used by some writers and not others).

Note on sources

This chapter draws on Wikipedia's *Anglo-Saxon runes* (the first 100,000 of about 181,000 characters), the article on the Old English Latin alphabet (as the page tool returned it) and, for the runic dating, the *Old English* article read for Chapter 3. I did not read the later part of the runes article, the rune poem itself, or any scholarly source. The explanations of "scriptorium", "insular script" and "ligature" are mine and unverified. I stated no change in Middle English spelling because the articles I read did not describe it. Old English Grammar 1, Chapter 1 teaches the alphabet itself, and Writing Systems of the World is a related course on writing in general.

Coming up in Chapter 5: The Early Texts. Bede, Cædmon and the Northumbrian age: the earliest English writing, and Cædmon's Hymn in its two versions.

The Story of Old English

Course 1 · Chapter 5 · The Early Texts

Once English could be written (Chapter 4), what did people write? The earliest answer comes from the Northumbrian monasteries of the seventh and eighth centuries, where the great scholar wrote in Latin and the first poem we can date in English is credited to a cowherd.

The story in one box

Bede (c. 672 or 673 to 735), a monk of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow in Northumbria, wrote in Latin. In his *Ecclesiastical History* he tells of Cædmon, an illiterate cowherd at Whitby who was miraculously given the gift of song. A nine-line poem credited to Cædmon is, if Bede is right, from between 658 and 680 and is the oldest surviving English poem.

Bede

According to Wikipedia's *Bede* article, Bede (c. 672 or 673 to 26 May 735) was an Anglo-Saxon Benedictine monk, writer and scholar in the Kingdom of Northumbria. He was born on lands of the twin monastery of Monkwearmouth–Jarrow, was sent to Monkwearmouth at about the age of seven, and later moved to Jarrow with Abbot Ceolfrith. He spent most of his life there. He was canonised in 1899 as a Doctor of the Church.

Work or topic	What the article says
<i>Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i>	Completed around 731; his best-known work; it traces the growth of Christianity in England, with a focus on the church rather than secular kings; it earned him the title "The Father of English History"
Other works	Biblical commentaries, homilies, saints' lives (including of Cuthbert), works on computus (calculating the date of Easter) and the reckoning of time, grammar and metre textbooks, and some Latin poetry
Language	His works were in Latin; the article quotes Michael Lapidge calling him "without question the most accomplished Latinist produced in these islands in the Anglo-Saxon period"

Work or topic	What the article says
Dating years	He did not invent <i>Anno Domini</i> , which came from Dionysius Exiguus, but adopted it as his main method in <i>De Temporum Ratione</i> , which is the main reason it became widely used

The point for this course is that the best-educated Englishman of his day wrote in Latin, not in English. Bede is also the source for Chapter 2's three peoples, and the Cædmon story below.

Bede's Death Song

The *Bede* article says that Cuthbert's letter on Bede's death describes a five-line vernacular poem Bede composed on his deathbed, known as "Bede's Death Song". Its attribution to Bede is uncertain, since not all manuscripts name him as the author. The *Cædmon's Hymn* article calls the Death Song the most attested Old English poem. I did not read the text of it for this chapter.

Cædmon

Wikipedia's *Cædmon's Hymn* article gives Bede's story. Cædmon was an illiterate cowherd at Whitby. He left a feast when the harp came round, because he could not sing. In a dream a man asked him to "Sing to me the beginning of all things", and he woke able to sing new verses. The Abbess Hilda encouraged him to become a monk, and he went on to compose more poems on biblical subjects.

The article says that if Bede is right the hymn was composed between 658 and 680, which would make it the oldest surviving English poem. Even on manuscript evidence alone it is the earliest securely datable Old English verse.

Bede gave Latin, not English

The article records that Bede gave only a Latin prose paraphrase of the hymn, not the Old English. He remarked that verse cannot be translated word for word without losing its beauty and dignity. The Old English survives only because scribes added it, often in the margins, to copies of Bede's Latin text or of its Old English translation. The article says closely related Bede manuscripts sometimes contain very different versions.

How many versions?

Old English Reading 1, Chapter 3 reads the hymn in the normalised Northumbrian text of the Moore Bede. The article says the picture is more complicated than "a Northumbrian and a West Saxon version": it identifies five substantively different recensions, two Northumbrian and three West Saxon, distinguished by the word used in one half-line. It counts about two dozen manuscripts (23, though it is not consistent about whether the count includes a destroyed manuscript known from a facsimile), all copies of Bede's *History* or its Old English translation. It names the Moore Bede (Cambridge, mid-eighth century, Northumbrian) as the oldest or second-oldest copy, and the Saint Petersburg Bede (first half of the eighth century) as the other candidate.

Watch out

"The oldest English poem" has two conditions. It is Cædmon's only surviving work, and its 658 to 680 date depends on trusting Bede's story. On manuscript evidence alone it is the earliest securely datable Old English verse. Do not read the story of the dream as a document: it is Bede's account, written decades later.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Computus	The calculation of the date of Easter and of the calendar
Recension	A distinct version of a text that is preserved in a group of manuscripts
Paraphrase	A restatement in other words, not a word-for-word translation
Vernacular	The everyday language of a people, as opposed to Latin
Doctor of the Church	A title given to a few saints for their teaching



Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. In what language did Bede write his works?

▼ Show answer

Latin.

2. Where did Bede spend most of his life?

▼ Show answer

At the twin monastery of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow in Northumbria.

3. Which work of Bede's was completed around 731?

▼ Show answer

The *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

4. Who was Cædmon, according to Bede?

▼ Show answer

An illiterate cowherd at Whitby who was miraculously given the ability to sing, and who became a monk.

5. When was the hymn composed, if Bede is right?

▼ Show answer

Between 658 and 680.

6. Did Bede give the Old English of the hymn?

▼ Show answer

No, only a Latin prose paraphrase. The Old English was added by scribes to manuscripts.

7. How many recensions of the hymn does the article identify?

▼ Show answer

Five: two Northumbrian and three West Saxon.

8. Why is Bede's Death Song's authorship uncertain?

▼ Show answer

Not all manuscripts name Bede as its author.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Bede* (the first 100,000 of about 233,000 characters; it did not include an account of Cædmon) and *Cædmon's Hymn*. The article is inconsistent about the manuscript count, and I say so above. It also lists a manuscript found in Rome in 2026, which I did not use. I did not read the Death Song, Bede's own text, or any scholarly study. The explanations of the terms in the table are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 6: Alfred and Written English. King Alfred, the translations into English, and why West Saxon became the model.

The Story of Old English

Course 1 · Chapter 6 · Alfred and Written English

In the ninth century the Vikings overran much of England (Chapter 3), and Wessex survived. Its king, Alfred, is credited with something unusual for the age: a programme to put learning and history into English, not only Latin. That programme is why so much Old English is West Saxon.

The story in one box

Alfred ruled Wessex from 871 and defended it against the Vikings. During his reign Latin works were translated into English, and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was compiled. His preface to the *Pastoral Care* says learning had declined badly, and the Wikipedia article on him says he probably exaggerated.

Alfred and the Vikings

According to Wikipedia's *Alfred the Great* article, Alfred ruled Wessex from 871 to about 886, and then styled himself King of the Anglo-Saxons until his death in 899. He succeeded his brother Æthelred after years of Viking attacks. After a near-collapse in 878, when Chippenham fell and Alfred fled to Athelney, he rallied forces and won the Battle of Edington. The Danish leader Guthrum converted to Christianity, and the treaty that followed divided Mercia, with the Danelaw as the Viking-ruled east. The article says Alfred took London in 886 and built a network of fortified burhs.

The Danelaw is the subject of Chapter 7. For this chapter, the point is that the dialect areas of Northumbria and eastern Mercia (Chapter 3) were under Viking rule, and what remained of English kingship centred on Wessex.

Alfred's learning programme

The article says Alfred recruited clerical scholars from Mercia, Wales and abroad, and sought to require literacy among those holding offices of authority. He had Latin works translated into the vernacular, which he deemed "most necessary for all men to know".

Work	What the article says
Gregory's <i>Dialogues</i>	The earliest translated work; made by Bishop Wærferth of Worcester at Alfred's command, with only a preface from the king
<i>Pastoral Care</i>	One of the works traditionally called Alfred's own
Boethius, <i>Consolation of Philosophy</i>	Another "Alfredian" translation
Augustine, <i>Soliloquies</i>	Another "Alfredian" translation
The first fifty psalms	Another "Alfredian" translation
Orosius's <i>Histories</i> ; Bede's <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>	In the wider programme

The article says scholars now doubt that Alfred wrote these personally. They are called "Alfredian", produced under his patronage with help from the court. It names the learned Mercian clerics at court, including Plegmund (archbishop of Canterbury from 890) and Wærferth, and also Asser, who came from the monastery of Saint David in south-west Wales and wrote the *Life of King Alfred*, and John the Saxon from Francia. This matches the Chapter 3 note that many of Alfred's translations were made by Mercian scholars. The article does not discuss the dialect of the translations, so I say no more about it.

The preface to the Pastoral Care

Gregory's *Pastoral Care* is a treatise on clergy responsibilities written by Pope Gregory I around 590. According to Wikipedia's *Pastoral Care* article, Alfred translated it into Old English in the late ninth century, as part of a project to improve education, and the translation is kept at the Bodleian Library. The article calls it the oldest surviving book written in English; I take that as the article's claim. It says Alfred wanted every bishop in his kingdom to have a copy to help less-educated clergy.

The *Alfred* article adds that the preface says learning had declined so badly that few men south of the Humber could understand their services in English, and notes that Alfred likely exaggerated for effect. He described his method as translating "sometimes word for word,

sometimes sense for sense", and circulated the translation to all his bishops. Copies were still being made in the eleventh century.

Watch out

Do not treat the preface as a report of fact. It is a king arguing for a programme, and the article says he likely exaggerated. And "Alfred's translations" means "translations made under Alfred", not necessarily by him.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

According to Wikipedia's *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* article, the Chronicle is a set of annals in Old English recording English history year by year, beginning with 60 BC. The lost original was compiled in the late ninth century, probably in Wessex during Alfred's reign, and its shared core, the "Common Stock", dates to about 893. The article says it was probably produced in Alfred's scholarly circle and promotes his dynasty. The Wikipedia article on Alfred says it was probably meant to promote the unification of England.

- **Manuscripts:** nine survive in whole or in part, none of them the original, labelled A to I. The oldest, A (the Winchester or Parker Chronicle), was begun at Old Minster, Winchester toward the end of Alfred's reign.
- **Copying:** copies were sent to monasteries, where scribes added material and sometimes updated them independently, so the manuscripts often describe the same events differently.
- **Languages:** most are in Old English; manuscript A switches to Latin for entries from 1070 to 1075.
- **The Peterborough Chronicle (E):** a new copy was made after a fire in 1116. One scribe wrote the entries up to 1131, and a later scribe wrote 1132 to 1154 in Middle English. The article calls the text from 1131 key evidence for the shift from standard Old English to early Middle English.

The Old English entries read in Old English Reading 1, Chapters 4 and 5 are from the Peterborough Chronicle (E) as printed on Wikisource. Chapter 9 of this course returns to the move to Middle English.

Why West Saxon became the model

Putting the pieces together, as Chapter 3 outlined: the Viking conquests removed the rivals, Alfred's Wessex absorbed the rest of Mercia and Kent, and the translations and the Chronicle were written under his patronage in the West Saxon of his court. The *Old English* article says Early West Saxon became the language of government and the basis for literature and religious translations. That is my summary of two articles, not a claim either one makes in this form.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Burh	A fortified settlement; Alfred built a network of them (per the article)
Patronage	Support, here a ruler's backing of a project
Treatise	A formal written work on one subject
Annals	A record of events set out year by year
Alfredian	Made under Alfred's patronage, not necessarily by him

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. When did Alfred rule Wessex, and when did he die?

▼ Show answer

He ruled from 871 and died in 899.

2. Which battle did Alfred win in 878?

▼ Show answer

The Battle of Edington.

3. Name two works translated into Old English in his programme.

▼ Show answer

For example the *Pastoral Care* and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*; also Augustine's *Soliloquies*, the first fifty psalms, Orosius's *Histories*, Bede's *History* and Gregory's *Dialogues*.

4. Did Alfred translate them all himself?

▼ Show answer

Scholars now doubt it. They are "Alfredian", produced under his patronage with court help; Bishop Wærferth, for instance, made the *Dialogues*.

5. What does the preface to the *Pastoral Care* claim, and why be careful with it?

▼ Show answer

That learning had declined so badly that few south of the Humber could understand their services in English; the article says Alfred likely exaggerated for effect.

6. Roughly when was the Chronicle's common core compiled?

▼ Show answer

About 893, in the late ninth century.

7. Which Chronicle manuscript contains early Middle English?

▼ Show answer

The Peterborough Chronicle (E), in its entries from 1131 onward.

8. Why did the Chronicle's manuscripts differ from each other?

▼ Show answer

Copies were sent to monasteries, where scribes added material and updated them independently, so the accounts reflect different agendas.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Alfred the Great* (characters 0 to 200,000 of about 278,000), *Pastoral Care* and *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (the first 100,000 of about 120,000 characters). I did not read the last 78,000 characters of the Alfred article, the last 20,000 of the Chronicle article, or any scholarly study, and I did not read Alfred's preface itself. The table, the Chapter 3 link and the closing summary are mine; the term definitions are mine and unverified. The Pastoral Care article's remark that its translation is "the oldest surviving book written in English" is the article's claim, and I did not check it.

Coming up in Chapter 7: The Vikings. The Danelaw, Old Norse and English, and the Norse loanwords.

The Story of Old English

Course 1 · Chapter 7 · The Vikings

The Vikings appear in Chapters 3 and 6 as the force that broke the northern and eastern dialects and made Alfred's Wessex the centre of English writing. This chapter looks at them as speakers: Scandinavians who settled in England and left words, place names, and a long argument about English grammar.

The story in one box

A coalition of mainly Danish Vikings landed in East Anglia in 865. They took Northumbria, East Anglia and most of Mercia, and in the settlement after Edington (878) the Danelaw was created. Their language, Old Norse, was closely related to Old English. It left place names such as those ending in *-by*, hundreds of words, and the pronoun *they*. How far it changed English grammar is disputed.

The Great Heathen Army

According to Wikipedia's *Great Heathen Army* article, a coalition of mainly Danish Vikings invaded England in 865 and fought for about fourteen years.

Date	Event (per the article)
865	The army lands in East Anglia; King Edmund gives them horses in return for peace; they winter at Thetford
late 866 to 867	They take York; the Northumbrians pay danegeld, and the Vikings set up a puppet ruler
867	They capture Nottingham; the Mercians pay them off
869 to 870	East Anglia: Edmund is captured and killed, and later becomes Edmund the Martyr
871	Alfred's forces defeat the Vikings at Ashdown; Alfred then pays them to leave
876 to 880	Halfdan shares out Northumbrian land; his men "ploughed the land and supported themselves"

Date	Event (per the article)
878	Alfred beats them at Edington; Guthrum agrees to baptism and to withdraw from Wessex

The Danelaw

Wikipedia's *Danelaw* article says the Danelaw was the part of England where Danish law applied, from the late ninth century until the Norman Conquest in 1066. A treaty between Alfred and Guthrum, dated to about 886 to 890, set the boundaries and allowed the Danes self-government in exchange for loyalty to England. The area roughly covered Yorkshire, the central and eastern Midlands and the East of England, north of a line between London and Chester, though the article marks that boundary as needing a citation.

- **Five Boroughs:** Leicester, Nottingham, Derby, Stamford and Lincoln were fortified towns that became its key strongholds.
- **Settlers:** many were sokemen, a free-tenant class that made up 30 to 50 percent of the countryside population, according to the article.
- **Reconquest:** Edward the Elder's campaigns in the 910s conquered many Danish territories. In 954 Eric Bloodaxe was driven from Northumbria, ending the prospect of a northern Viking kingdom.
- **The date to avoid:** the article is explicit that the Danelaw did not end around 954: as a legal region it persisted until 1066.

Place names

The *Danelaw* article says Old Norse endings such as **-by** ("village") and **-thorp** ("hamlet") remain common in the North and the East Midlands, and *Kirby* and *Kirkby* names are also frequent. The *History of English* article says settlers often founded communities in places the Anglo-Saxons had not developed.

Old Norse and Old English

The *History of English* article describes Old Norse as a North Germanic language closely related to Old English. It gives these numbers:

Question	What the article says
Norse words in Old English writing	Only about 100 to 150, mainly about government and administration
Norse words borrowed into English overall	About 2,000, of which several hundred survive in Modern English
Examples	anger, bag, both, hit, law, leg, same, skill, sky, take, window, and the pronoun <i>they</i>
Pronouns	<i>they, them, their</i> are thought to derive from Old Norse forms; only the short form <i>'em</i> remains from the older English forms

The *Old Norse* article lists *egg, knife, sky* and *window* among common English words from Old Norse, and says Middle English, especially the northern dialects in the Danelaw area, was strongly influenced by Norse. It says Old East Norse was spoken in eastern England and Old West Norse in the north-west, especially Cumbria. I did not find a statement about how well speakers of the two languages understood each other.

One point is easy to miss. The *History of English* article says only about 100 to 150 Norse words appear in Old English writing, so most of the borrowing is seen in later writing. It says Norse speakers assimilated after Danish rule ended and especially after the Norman Conquest, and that the resulting bilingualism possibly increased borrowing. It also says many Norse loanwords reached English directly from French.

Did Norse simplify English grammar?

The same article says Norse influence is considered to have stimulated and accelerated the simplification of Middle English, such as the loss of grammatical gender and of case marking except in pronouns, and that this simplification appeared earliest in the north and latest in the south-west. It says Norse reinforced the plural *are* over Old English alternatives, and may have helped spread phrasal verbs, though a Celtic influence is also possible. Some scholars have claimed that Old English died out and was replaced by Norse, since Middle English syntax resembles Norse more than Old English, but other scholars reject this. The article says it is unclear how much Norse shaped the spoken language of the north and east at the time.

Watch out

"The Vikings simplified English" is a plausible hypothesis, not an established fact in what I read. The article says Norse is "considered" to have accelerated simplification, records scholars who disagree, and says the effect on speech at the time is unclear. Also remember that the number of Norse words in Old English writing is small. Most Norse loanwords show up later.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Danelaw	The part of England under Danish law, from the late 9th century to 1066
Danegeld	Money paid to Vikings to buy them off
Old Norse	The North Germanic language of the Scandinavians
Loanword	A word taken from another language
Assimilate	To become absorbed into the surrounding population and its language

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. In which year did the Great Heathen Army invade, and where did it land?

▼ Show answer

| 865, in East Anglia.

2. Which Viking leader agreed to baptism after Edington?

▼ Show answer

| Guthrum.

3. Name three of the Five Boroughs.

▼ Show answer

Any three of Leicester, Nottingham, Derby, Stamford and Lincoln.

4. When did the Danelaw end, according to the article?

▼ Show answer

As a legal region it persisted until the Norman Conquest in 1066; 954 is when Eric Bloodaxe was driven from Northumbria, not the end of the Danelaw.

5. What do the place-name endings **-by** and **-thorp** mean?

▼ Show answer

"Village" and "hamlet".

6. Name three English words from Old Norse.

▼ Show answer

For example sky, law, take, window, egg, knife, leg, skill, anger, bag, same, both or hit.

7. Which pronouns are thought to come from Old Norse?

▼ Show answer

They, them and their.

8. Why should you be careful with "the Vikings simplified English"?

▼ Show answer

The article says Norse is "considered" to have accelerated simplification, records scholars who disagree, and says its effect on speech at the time is unclear.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Great Heathen Army* (the first 100,000 of about 117,000 characters), *Danelaw* (the first 100,000 of about 131,000), *History of English* (the

"Scandinavian influence" subsection and related passages, of the first 100,000 of about 158,000 characters), and *Old Norse* (the first 100,000 of about 167,000). A separate article on Norse influence on English did not exist under the titles I tried. I did not read any scholarly study or the Chronicle entries themselves. The definitions in the table are mine and unverified, and the sentence on how well speakers understood each other is a gap, not a finding.

Coming up in Chapter 8: The Late Age. Ælfric, Wulfstan and the great manuscripts: the late prose, and how *Beowulf* and the Exeter Book survived.

The Story of Old English

Course 1 · Chapter 8 · The Late Age

Most of what we call Old English literature was not written down in Cædmon's time or Alfred's, but around the year 1000. This chapter looks at why: a church reform that built writing workshops, two prolific authors, and two great manuscripts that preserve the poems read in Old English Reading 1.

The story in one box

In the later tenth century, King Edgar backed a Benedictine reform led by Dunstan, Æthelwold and Oswald. Its schools produced a standard West Saxon, and its pupils wrote much of the surviving prose: Ælfric the teacher and Wulfstan the preacher. Most surviving Old English poetry, including *Beowulf* and the Exeter Book, survives in copies from the late tenth and early eleventh centuries.

The Benedictine reform

According to Wikipedia's *English Benedictine Reform* article, the reform was a movement to restore strict monastic life, drawing on Continental houses such as Fleury and Ghent. It gained force under King Edgar, from about 959 to 975.

Leader	Office (per the article)	Note
Dunstan	Archbishop of Canterbury, 959 to 988; earlier Abbot of Glastonbury	The article says his own contributions are hard to identify
Æthelwold	Bishop of Winchester, 963 to 984	The main propagandist and the most confrontational; expelled secular clergy from the Old and New Minsters at Winchester in 963
Oswald	Archbishop of York, 971 to 992; Bishop of Worcester from 961	More gradual; kept clerics at Worcester Cathedral

The article says that by 975 about 30 male houses and 7 or 8 nunneries had been reformed, perhaps 10% of religious establishments. The *Regularis Concordia*, written by Æthelwold, aimed to standardise church services and monastic practice across England; the article dates its adoption to about 970 and says it may belong to the 960s. After Edgar died in 975 an "anti-monastic reaction" set in, and renewed Viking attacks from the 980s hit the reformed houses.

The article says the reform was not simply a recovery from the Vikings. It records that scholars such as Blair argue the secularisation of minsters began before the reform and mattered more than the raids themselves. I did not read further into that argument.

What it did for written English

- **Translation:** the Rule of St Benedict was translated into Old English, probably by Æthelwold, and the article calls it the only surviving prose translation of the Rule into a European vernacular from this period.
- **Standard language:** the article says Æthelwold's school aimed to establish a standard West Saxon literary language, probably started by Æthelwold himself, and that Hofstetter argues Winchester's efforts shaped the literary standard across late Old English England.
- **The copying:** the article notes that most surviving vernacular literature came from followers of the reformers, and that much Old English poetry, including the *Beowulf* manuscript, survives in late tenth- and early eleventh-century copies.

This is the Late West Saxon of Chapter 3, and the written standard taught in Old English Grammar 1. The word "standard" here means a deliberate school habit, not a spoken language everyone shared.

Ælfric

Wikipedia's *Ælfric of Eynsham* article gives his life as c. 955 to c. 1010. He was educated at the Old Minster, Winchester, under Æthelwold, was sent to teach at Cerne Abbey in 987 (one of only two certain dates, says the article), and became first abbot of Eynsham in 1005.

Work	What the article says
<i>Catholic Homilies</i>	Two series of English sermons based on the Church Fathers, dedicated about 990 to 994 to Archbishop Sigeric

Work	What the article says
<i>Lives of the Saints</i>	A third series, written 996 to 997; some is rhythmical, alliterative prose
Grammar, Glossary and Colloquy	Latin teaching texts; the article calls the grammar the first vernacular Latin grammar in medieval Europe
Hexateuch	His translation of Genesis and other books, described as the first Old Testament translation from Latin into Old English

The article calls him "the most prolific writer in Old English" and says he translated Genesis by meaning rather than strictly word for word. It does not discuss his dialect, so I say nothing about it.

Wulfstan

According to the Wikipedia article on Wulfstan (died 1023), he was Bishop of London from 996, then in 1002 was elected to both Worcester and York, and remained Archbishop of York until his death on 28 May 1023. He wrote the royal law codes for Æthelred II from about 1005 to 1016, and laws for Cnut issued at Winchester in 1021 or 1022.

His best-known work is the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, "Sermon of the Wolf to the English", written in 1014. The article says it treats the raids as God's punishment for English sins and urges repentance. It describes his homilies as using alliterative word pairs and repetition, giving them an urgent rhythm, and says he wrote plainly for ordinary parishioners. The article is inconsistent on attribution: one section says over 30 Old English sermons, another says 26 sermons, 22 of them in Old English.

Ælfric and Wulfstan are the two best-known prose writers of the age. The contrast, which is my summary of the two articles and not a claim either makes: Ælfric as a teacher and translator, Wulfstan as a preacher and law-writer.

The poetry manuscripts

Two manuscripts carry the poetry read in Old English Reading 1. According to the *Beowulf* article, the poem survives in one manuscript, the Nowell Codex (British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv), made about AD 975 to 1025. The article says this is "the only certain dating", since

estimates for when the poem was composed range from about 700 to 1000, and scholars disagree.

- **Two scribes:** the first copied the opening prose and lines up to 1,939, regularising the spelling into West Saxon. The second copied the rest and kept more archaic dialect forms.
- **The fire:** a fire at Ashburnham House in 1731 charred the margins and some readings were lost. Later crumbling and rebinding caused further loss.
- **Rediscovery:** Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin made the first transcriptions in 1786 for a Danish commission, and later produced the first complete edition, in Latin.

The *Exeter Book* article says it was probably produced in the late tenth century, with proposed dates from 960 to 990. Its traceable history begins in 1072, when Leofric, the first bishop of Exeter, left a large English book of verse to the Exeter monastery. It holds saints' lives, wisdom poems, heroic poems, about 90 to 100 riddles, two poems signed by Cynewulf, and the elegies, including *The Wanderer* (the subject of Old English Reading 1, Chapter 9). Poems have no titles in the manuscript, and the original first leaves are lost. The article does not discuss the dialect of the manuscript.

Watch out

A poem's manuscript date is not its composition date. The *Beowulf* manuscript is about 975 to 1025, but the poem may be centuries older or not; scholars disagree. The same goes for the Exeter Book elegies. Also, in *Beowulf*, the first scribe's West Saxon spelling shows that a copyist may have changed the language, so a copy is not a photograph of the original.

Old English Reading 1, Chapter 8 reads the opening lines of *Beowulf*, Chapter 9 reads *The Wanderer*, and Chapter 10 reads *The Battle of Maldon*. I did not check, in this chapter's sources, where the manuscript of *Maldon* comes from, so I say nothing about it.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Benedictine	Following the Rule of St Benedict, the main monastic rule in western Europe

Term	Meaning
Secular clergy	Priests who lived outside a monastic rule
Homily	A sermon, here a written one
Codex	A manuscript in book form
Elegy	A poem of loss or reflection; the Exeter Book elegies are about exile and the passing of things (the Exeter Book article)
Scribe	The person who copied a manuscript by hand

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. Name the three leaders of the Benedictine reform in this chapter.

▼ Show answer

Dunstan, Æthelwold and Oswald.

2. Which king backed the reform?

▼ Show answer

Edgar, from about 959 to 975.

3. What did Æthelwold's school aim to establish?

▼ Show answer

A standard West Saxon literary language.

4. Who taught Ælfric, and where?

▼ Show answer

Æthelwold, at the Old Minster in Winchester.

5. Name two of Ælfric's works.

▼ Show answer

For example the *Catholic Homilies*, the *Lives of the Saints*, the Grammar, the Colloquy or the Hexateuch translation.

6. What was the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, and when was it written?

▼ Show answer

Wulfstan's "Sermon of the Wolf to the English", written in 1014, treating the raids as God's punishment for English sins.

7. What is the only certain date for the *Beowulf* manuscript, and what happened to it in 1731?

▼ Show answer

The manuscript dates to about 975 to 1025, which is the only certain dating. A fire at Ashburnham House in 1731 charred its margins and some readings were lost.

8. How did the Exeter Book come to be called that?

▼ Show answer

Bishop Leofric of Exeter left a large English book of verse to the Exeter monastery in 1072, and scholars widely identify it with this codex.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *English Benedictine Reform* (the first 100,000 of about 132,000 characters), *Ælfric of Eynsham*, the article on Wulfstan (died 1023) (the first 100,000 of about 109,000 characters), *Beowulf* (the first 100,000 of about 199,000 characters) and *Exeter Book*, each as the page tool summarised it. The page called *Benedictine Reform* covers the Continental movement and did not help. I did not read the remainder of those articles, any scholarly study, or the sermons or poems themselves. The leaders table layout, the Ælfric and Wulfstan contrast and the term definitions are mine and unverified. I did not check the manuscript of *Maldon*.

Coming up in Chapter 9: 1066 and After. The Norman Conquest, French and Latin, and how Old English turned into Middle English.

The Story of Old English

Course 1 · Chapter 9 · 1066 and After

The Late West Saxon of Chapter 8 was a written standard with royal and church backing. In 1066 both props were knocked away. This chapter follows what happened to the language: who stopped using it for official purposes, what it took from French, and how one monastery's chronicle records the change as it happened.

The story in one box

William of Normandy won the Battle of Hastings on 14 October 1066 and was crowned on 25 December. The English aristocracy was almost entirely replaced. Anglo-Norman French became the language of the ruling classes, official documents moved from Old English to Latin, and English lost prestige in education and administration, but it remained the everyday vernacular. Over the next centuries it lost most case endings and gender and took in French words, becoming Middle English.

The Conquest in dates

According to Wikipedia's *Norman conquest of England* article:

Date	Event
Jan 1066	Edward the Confessor dies; Harold Godwinson succeeds
25 Sep 1066	Harold defeats Harald Hardrada and Tostig at Stamford Bridge
28 Sep 1066	William lands at Pevensey
14 Oct 1066	Battle of Hastings; Harold is killed
25 Dec 1066	William is crowned at Westminster Abbey
1069 to 1070	The Harrying of the North
1071	Ely falls, the effective end of English resistance
1086	Domesday Book completed

Date	Event
1095	After Wulfstan of Worcester's death, no Englishman holds a bishopric

Who ruled, and in what language

The article says the English aristocracy was almost wholly removed: by 1086 only about 5% of land south of the Tees was in English hands, and about 8,000 Norman landholders had replaced them. After 1075 all earldoms were held by Normans. It says Anglo-Norman, "a northern dialect of Old French", became the language of the ruling classes, displacing Old English, and that the language of official documents changed from Old English to Latin.

The article does not say what language the church or the law courts used, and it does not name the language of Domesday Book, so I leave those blank. (The Wulfstan of Worcester in the 1095 entry is a different man from the Wulfstan of Chapter 8.)

Watch out

"The Normans banned English" is not something I found in these articles. What the sources say is narrower: the ruling class spoke French, official documents moved to Latin, and English lost prestige in education and administration. Most people carried on speaking English.

Middle English

Wikipedia's *Middle English* article dates the language from the Conquest of 1066 until the late fifteenth century; Early Middle English ran from about 1150 to 1350, and the period ended around 1470. It says French became the preferred language of literature and polite discourse, and that little early Middle English literature survives.

Change	What the article says
French words	Many Norman words came in beside native ones: <i>pig</i> and <i>pork</i> , <i>calf</i> and <i>veal</i> , <i>wood</i> and <i>forest</i> ; law and government terms such as <i>court</i> , <i>judge</i> , <i>jury</i> and <i>parliament</i>

Change	What the article says
Case	Dative and instrumental were replaced by prepositional constructions; most case endings disappeared; of the noun endings only the genitive -'s survived
Gender	Grammatical gender gave way to natural gender over the period
Cause	The article links the simplification to a shift toward fixed word order and also to Old Norse contact
Letters	Thorn and eth were replaced by <i>th</i> , and wynn by <i>w</i> ; yogh gave way to <i>j</i> , <i>y</i> or <i>gh</i> ; <i>k</i> , <i>q</i> and <i>z</i> came into common use
Standard	After Late West Saxon ended, scribes used many regional forms; the Chancery Standard, based on London speech, emerged around 1430, after Henry V began issuing Signet letters in English in August 1417

This answers the question Chapter 4 left open: the letters **þ**, **ð** and **ƿ** did drop out of use, and the *Middle English* article is where I found it. It lists four main dialect areas: Northern, East Midland, West Midland and Southern. It says London English developed from East Midland-influenced speech, and that early Scots developed from Northumbrian Old English in lowland Scotland. I did not read about the date of the first official use of English in the courts; the article's passage did not mention the 1362 Statute of Pleading, so I do not state that date.

The Peterborough Chronicle

Chapter 6 introduced the Peterborough Chronicle as the manuscript that shows the move into Middle English. According to Wikipedia's *Peterborough Chronicle* article, a fire at Peterborough on 4 August 1116 destroyed the monastery's library, and the abbey then copied chronicles from other churches up to 1120, the earliest part being a copy of Winchester's. The unique continuations begin after 1122.

Part	What the article says
Copied entries (to 1122)	Old English; mix several sources; grammatical gender mostly preserved

Part	What the article says
First continuation (1122 to 1131)	Late Old English with Middle English vocabulary, more French-type word formations, simpler pronouns and strong verbs, fewer noun declensions
Second continuation (1132 to 1154)	Mixed forms, ending in an early, distinctly Middle English style; gender nearly or completely lost

The article says the feminine pronoun *she* (written **scæ**) is first recorded here. The Chronicle ends in 1154 with the death of Abbot Martin and the arrival of a new abbot, William, who probably halted the writing. The article calls it one of the few first-hand English accounts of 1070 to 1154 from a non-courtly viewpoint.

Its entry for 1137 blames King Stephen for being too gentle with rebel barons. The article quotes the line **þa the suikes undergæton ðat he milde man was and softe and god**, which mixes the old letter **þ** with the newer *th*. That mixture is a small picture of the period.

The sudden change between the copied and the original parts of the manuscript has two possible readings in the article: a deliberate move toward the vernacular, or a fast language shift under Norman influence. The article presents both, and so do I; I did not find which scholars prefer which.

The 1137 entry and Old English entries for the earlier years are the kind of text read in Old English Reading 1, Chapters 4 and 5.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Anglo-Norman	The French of the Normans in England; the article calls it a northern dialect of Old French
Tenant-in-chief	Someone holding land directly from the king
Vernacular	The everyday language of the people
Doublet	Two words of the same origin that came in by different routes, such as <i>warden</i> and <i>guardian</i>

Term	Meaning
Continuation	Entries added to a chronicle after the copied part ends

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check.

1. On what date was the Battle of Hastings, and when was William crowned?

▼ Show answer

14 October 1066 and 25 December 1066.

2. What happened to the English aristocracy?

▼ Show answer

It was almost wholly replaced; by 1086 only about 5% of land south of the Tees was in English hands.

3. Which language did the ruling classes speak, and which became the language of official documents?

▼ Show answer

Anglo-Norman French for the ruling classes, and Latin for official documents.

4. Give two pairs of English and French-origin words for animal and meat.

▼ Show answer

Pig and pork, calf and veal.

5. Name two grammatical features English lost in the Middle English period.

▼ Show answer

Most case endings, and grammatical gender (replaced by natural gender).

6. What replaced thorn and wynn?

▼ Show answer

th and *w*.

7. Why was the Peterborough Chronicle re-copied, and when does it end?

▼ Show answer

A fire in 1116 destroyed the library, so chronicles were copied from other churches. It ends in 1154.

8. What two explanations does the article give for the change of language in its continuations?

▼ Show answer

A deliberate move toward the vernacular, or a fast language shift under Norman influence.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *Norman conquest of England* (the first 100,000 of about 190,000 characters), *Middle English* (the first 100,000 of about 152,000) and *Peterborough Chronicle* (the whole page), each as the page tool summarised it. The excerpt of the Conquest article did not state the language of the church, the courts or Domesday Book, and I left those out. I did not read the Chronicle text itself beyond the one quoted line, or any scholarly study. The Chapter 4 and Chapter 6 links and the term definitions are mine and unverified.

Coming up in Chapter 10: What Survived. What Old English left in Modern English, how it was rediscovered, a recap of the whole story, and what to read next.

The Story of Old English

Course 1 · Chapter 10 · What Survived

The last chapter asks what is left. Old English did not vanish in 1066: it changed, it was nearly forgotten, and it was then rediscovered by people with their own reasons. This chapter covers what the sources say about the legacy in Modern English, who saved the manuscripts, and where the question of Modern English's ancestry stands. It ends with a recap of the whole story.

The story in one box

Old English is not the main source of Modern English words: according to Wikipedia's *English language* article, French dialects contributed about 28% and Latin another 28%. But most basic everyday vocabulary is still Germanic, and the grammar and sound system remain Germanic. The manuscripts that survive owe a great deal to sixteenth-century collectors such as Archbishop Matthew Parker, who had religious reasons for publishing them.

What is left in Modern English

Question	What the <i>English language</i> article says
Share of vocabulary	Old English is not the main source of the lexicon: French dialects about 28%, Latin "an additional 28 per cent"
Everyday words	Most basic everyday vocabulary remains Germanic, which is the part of the lexicon most tied to Old English
Grammar and sound	"Grammar and phonology remain Germanic" despite heavy borrowing
Inflection	Old English had far more inflections; Modern English keeps case only in pronouns (<i>he/him, she/her</i>), and verb forms are reduced to a few, like <i>speak, speaks, speaking, spoke, spoken</i>
Irregular forms	Still being regularised, as in <i>dreamed</i> replacing <i>dreamt</i>

I read only the first 100,000 of about 254,000 characters of that article, which did not reach its Vocabulary section or the full Grammar section, so I do not give a list of the most common English words that come from Old English. The article did not discuss plurals or irregular verbs as a specific legacy. The courses Old English Grammar 1 and Old English Reading 1 let you see for yourself how much a Modern English speaker can recognise.

The question left open: Modern English's ancestry

Chapter 3 recorded the claim in Wikipedia's *Old English* article that Standard English descends from Mercian rather than West Saxon, and Scots from Northumbrian, and noted that the article tags both "citation needed". I went looking for something firmer for this chapter. The later part of the *Old English* article (characters 100,000 to 200,000) made no statement on the descent of Standard English. The *Middle English* article read for Chapter 9 says London English developed from East Midland-influenced speech and that early Scots developed from Northumbrian Old English in lowland Scotland. That supports the Scots half of the claim at the level of one Wikipedia article. For Standard English, I can only say what the sources say: London English, East Midland influence, and the Chancery Standard of about 1430. Whether that makes Mercian the ancestor is a link I could not confirm from them.

Watch out

"Modern English comes from West Saxon" and "Modern English comes from Mercian" are both too simple. The sources I read describe a chain, not a single line: Late West Saxon as the written standard of 1000, then regional Middle English, then a London-based standard in the fifteenth century. Treat any one-line answer as a summary of that chain.

How the manuscripts were saved and found again

Wikipedia's *Matthew Parker* article gives his dates as 1504 to 1575, and says he was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1559. His collection was "largely collected from former monastic libraries" and left to his Cambridge college, Corpus Christi, where the Parker Library holds most of it. It includes Version A of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the oldest manuscript in Chapter 6. In 1567 he published a homily on the Sacrament by Ælfric (Chapter 8), and he also published *A Testimonie of Antiquitie*, an Old English homily. The article says his manuscript work was meant to show that the English Church was historically independent of Rome, and that the homilies were meant to

show that transubstantiation was not the doctrine of the ancient English Church. His work with Laurence Nowell is said to have laid the foundation for Anglo-Saxon studies. The article does not tie his collecting to the Dissolution of the Monasteries or date it, so I do not.

- **Nowell:** the codex that holds *Beowulf* is named after him (Chapter 8).
- **Thorkelin, 1786:** the first transcriptions of *Beowulf*, then the first complete edition, in Latin (Chapter 8).
- **Dictionaries:** the *Old English* article mentions Somner's *Dictionarium Saxonico-Latino-Anglicum* and Bosworth's dictionary of 1838, and names the *Dictionary of Old English* and Bosworth–Toller among modern dictionaries.
- **Tolkien:** the article names J. R. R. Tolkien and Alistair Campbell among later writers on Old English. I did not read about their work.

A caution from that article: it says purist and neo-Old English online communities were found, in one study, to contain basic grammatical errors. That is a reminder of why this course names its sources.

The whole story in ten steps

Chapter	The point to remember
1 Before English	Brittonic and Latin were spoken in Britain before English arrived
2 The Settlers	Germanic settlers came; 449 is only a traditional date
3 Four Dialects	Northumbrian, Mercian, Kentish and West Saxon; most of the record is West Saxon
4 Writing It Down	Runes first, then the Latin alphabet with the added letters
5 The Early Texts	Bede wrote in Latin; <i>Cædmon's Hymn</i> , if Bede is right, dates from 658 to 680
6 Alfred and Written English	Alfred's programme of translation and the <i>Chronicle</i> (common core about 893)
7 The Vikings	The Danelaw (to 1066 as a legal region) and the Norse words, including <i>they</i>

Chapter	The point to remember
8 The Late Age	The Benedictine reform, Ælfric, Wulfstan, and the late copies of the poetry
9 1066 and After	Conquest, French and Latin; Middle English; the Peterborough Chronicle to 1154
10 What Survived	Germanic grammar and basic words stayed; the manuscripts were saved by collectors

Where to go next

This course stops at about 1150. A planned course, The History of the English Language, would carry the story on to the present; it has no outline yet. The Timeline and Map pages in the appendix put the dates of this course in one place and the dialect areas on a sketch map.

Words to know

Term	Meaning
Lexicon	The words of a language
Antiquarian	A person who studies the past through old objects and texts
Transcription	A written copy of a text
Legacy	What is left behind or passed on
Neo-Old English	The article's label for modern attempts to write in an imitation of Old English

Try It Yourself

Think of the answer first, then click to check. Items 6 to 8 look back over the whole course.

1. What shares of Modern English words does the article give to French and to Latin?

▼ Show answer

About 28% from French dialects and another 28% from Latin.

2. What stays Germanic in Modern English despite the borrowing?

▼ Show answer

The grammar and phonology, and most basic everyday vocabulary.

3. In Modern English, where does case survive?

▼ Show answer

Only in pronouns, such as *he/him* and *she/her*.

4. Why did Matthew Parker publish Old English homilies?

▼ Show answer

The article says to show the English Church was historically independent of Rome, and that transubstantiation was not the doctrine of the ancient English Church.

5. Which Chronicle manuscript is held in the Parker Library?

▼ Show answer

Version A (the oldest, from Chapter 6).

6. Put in order: the Great Heathen Army lands; the Battle of Hastings; the Christian mission arrives (597); Alfred wins at Edington.

▼ Show answer

The mission (597), the Great Heathen Army (865), Edington (878), Hastings (1066).

7. Which Norse-derived pronouns replaced the older English ones?

▼ Show answer

They, them and *their* (Chapter 7); the article says they are "thought to" derive from Old Norse.

8. Why is "Modern English comes from West Saxon" too simple?

▼ Show answer

The sources describe a chain: Late West Saxon as the written standard, then regional Middle English, then a London-based standard (Chancery) in the fifteenth century. Whether Mercian is the ancestor is not confirmed in what I read.

Note on sources

This chapter uses Wikipedia's *English language* (the first 100,000 of about 254,000 characters), *Matthew Parker* (the first 100,000 of about 122,000), and, for the open question, characters 100,000 to 200,000 of *Old English* (about 208,000 in all) plus the *Middle English* article from Chapter 9. All came through the page tool's summaries. Pages I tried for the history of Old English scholarship (*Anglo-Saxon studies*) did not cover it, and I did not read any dedicated study of it. I did not read about Tolkien's or Campbell's work, and I did not find a list of common English words from Old English. The recap table, the "chain" wording and the term definitions are mine and unverified. The Parker article's remarks on the Dissolution of the Monasteries are not in what I read, and I do not make them.

Still to come: the appendix, with a Timeline page (the dates of this course in one list) and a Map page (a sketch of Britain with the dialect areas).