



Anglo Saxons

The origins of England

12–14 March 2025 (ML 636)

From £1,010 per person

Eleven 40-minute talks with Q&As and one panel discussion spanning Wednesday afternoon to Friday lunchtime.

Esteemed historians speak on Anglo Saxon history, archaeology, art and culture.

Based for two nights at the ever-welcoming Castle Hotel in Taunton.

The Anglo-Saxon era, from the early fifth century to the Norman Conquest, is crucial to our understanding of England, for it was during this turbulent half-millennium that the foundations of the country were laid. The early English produced dazzling works of art, such as the Sutton Hoo treasure and the Lindisfarne Gospels, and works of poetry that continue to resonate. It remains a period of considerable obscurity, far less well documented than the centuries that followed. In recent decades, however, thanks to the efforts of historians and archaeologists, more and more has been discovered about this dynamic yet mysterious lost world.

The excellent Castle Hotel, Taunton, is our host. Renowned for its service, comforts and superb catering, it has been owned and run by the Chapman family for over 60 years. The symposium takes place in the Music Room.

Our eminent speakers: Professor Michelle P. Brown, Professor Martin Carver, Dr Helen Gittos, Dr Marc Morris, Professor Rory Naismith, Professor Levi Roach.

Speakers

Professor Michelle P. Brown. Professor Emerita of Medieval Manuscript Studies at the University of London, she is a Visiting Professor at University College London and a Visiting Research Fellow at Durham University. Her former positions include the Curator of Medieval and Illuminated Manuscripts at the British Library, the Sanders Lecturer in Bibliography at Cambridge University, and Lay Canon and Chapter Member at St Paul's Cathedral. She has published on the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Luttrell Psalter, and the Holkham Bible. Her latest book is *Bede and the Theory of Everything* (Reaktion, 2023).

Professor Martin Carver. Professor Emeritus of Archaeology at the University of York.



Early 7th-century pendants unearthed in Kent. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Martin is a former army officer turned academic specialising in the archaeology of early medieval Europe. He was director of the Sutton Hoo Research Project and has an international reputation as a leading exponent of new methods in excavation and survey. He has also excavated in Scotland (Portmahomack), France, Italy, Sicily and Algeria. Carver holds fellowships to the Society of Antiquaries and the British Academy. He was editor of *Antiquity* for ten years. Since retirement he has focused on public communication of archaeology. He is a director of The Sutton Hoo Ship's Company, which aims to build a full-size and seaworthy replica of the Anglo-Saxon ship found there.

Dr Helen Gittos. Associate Professor, Colyer-Fergusson Fellow and Tutor in Early Medieval History at Balliol College, Oxford. Her work focuses on the history of the church and its rituals in the Middle Ages, and she is as interested in buildings, objects and archaeological evidence as on written texts.

She is the author of several works on medieval liturgy, including *Liturgy, Architecture and Sacred Places in Anglo-Saxon England* (2013). A second strand of her research has been about language, and in particular the role and status of English in relation to Latin; She has also been researching aspects of the conversion of the Anglo Saxons to Christianity.

Dr Marc Morris. Author of the *Sunday Times* bestseller *The Anglo-Saxons: A History of the Beginnings of England* (2021), as well as *The Norman Conquest* (2012) and biographies of Edward I and King John. Marc studied and taught at the universities of London and Oxford and is a fellow of the Royal Historical Society. He presented the highly acclaimed TV series *Castle* and wrote its accompanying book. He regularly writes for history magazines and broadcasts on radio and television.

Professor Rory Naismith. Professor of Early Medieval English History at Corpus Christi

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College Cambridge. His research focuses on economic and social developments in Anglo-Saxon England. He is interested in the cross-fertilisation of material and written sources, and has worked particularly closely with coinage. At present he is preparing a major study of the social impact of monetisation in early medieval England and its neighbours, to be published by Princeton University Press.

Professor Levi Roach. Professor of Medieval History and Diplomatic at the University of Exeter. He is the author of *Kingship and Consent in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Whitfield Prize 2014 proxime accessit) and *Aethelred the Unready* (Longman-History Today Prize 2017, Labarge Prize 2017) and *Forgery and Memory at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton University Press, 2021). His latest book is a popular history, *Empires of the Normans: Makers of Europe, Conquerors of Asia*.

Practicalities

Prices, per person. Two sharing: standard double or twin £1,010; garden room £1,260. **Single occupancy:** deluxe single £1,010; double for sole use £1,210.

Included: hotel accommodation for 2 nights; breakfasts and 2 dinners with wine; admission to the talks; drinks reception; refreshments during breaks; gratuities for hotel staff.

Accommodation. The Castle Hotel, Taunton (the-castle-hotel.com): the hotel's bedrooms are individually and charmingly decorated. Doubles and twins are mainly of a good size, and the largest – Garden Rooms – overlook the garden. The majority have a bath with a shower fitment (only four have a walk-in shower, so please request when you book if you require one of these).

The hotel has a lift, though some bedrooms do then involve some step access. There are no bedrooms on the ground floor. The Music Room is on a mezzanine level, which can only be reached via a flight of stairs from the lobby.

Taunton lies on the doorstep of Exmoor and the Quantocks, areas with some of the loveliest countryside in England.

Group size: maximum 68 resident participants.

The Programme

WEDNESDAY 12th MARCH

Session 1: 3.15pm to 6pm

Talk 1. Marc Morris

The Anglo-Saxons: An Overview

In the early fifth century Britain was a ruined Roman province – a land of crumbling temples and abandoned villas. By the late tenth century it was dominated by a newly forged kingdom called 'England' – a country of shires, monasteries, boroughs and bishoprics. That transformation was caused by the Anglo-Saxons. This talk explores their journey from warlords to kings, from paganism to Christianity, and from a galaxy of competing peoples to a single, unified nation.

Talk 2. Helen Gittos

Christianity before Conversion

How did people convert to Christianity in early medieval England? Helen Gittos explains how archaeological and art historical sources have informed new directions of research and proposes a revised framework for thinking about how such radical change could happen.

Talk 3. Martin Carver

The Sutton Hoo Story – encounters with Early England

Sutton Hoo in Suffolk is a 6th- and 7th-century burial site famous for its buried ship, laden with treasure, and unearthed in 1939. New excavations were undertaken between 1983

and 1991 to establish the context of the ship burial. The "Sutton Hoo Story" was then extended in both time and space: in time back to the neolithic and in space over Britain and the continent and the Mediterranean. Work in progress includes exploration of nearby fields in the National Trust property (by Time Team) and a full-sized reconstruction of the Mound 1 ship by the Sutton Hoo Ship's Company across the river at Woodbridge. This talk offers a review, update and a forum for new ideas.

THURSDAY 13th MORNING

Session 2: 9.30am to 1pm

Talk 4. Michelle Brown

Bede and the Northumbrian Renaissance

Bede (c.673-735) was one of the greatest scholars of the post-Roman West. But how did this Anglo-Saxon, entrusted aged 7 to the new monastery of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow and spending his life there, achieve this? Only travelling locally, how did he write a guide to the sacred sites of the Near East, still used by travellers in the early 20th century? How did he produce the first tide timetables, having recognised gravitational pull of the moon? Why is he 'the father of English history'? What was his role in creating Codex Amiatinus, the Lindisfarne Gospels and the cult of St Cuthbert? Did he give us our earliest English poetry and the first biblical translation in English? This lecture explores these questions, within the context of the Northumbrian Renaissance.

Talk 5. Helen Gittos

The Cerne Giant in its Early Medieval Context

New research on the Cerne Abbas Giant, a chalk hill figure carved on the hillside above a Dorset village, has shown that he was carved in the Anglo-Saxon period not, as most people thought, in prehistory or more recently. Helen will discuss ongoing research to understand why he was made and how this adds to our understanding of Anglo-Saxon west.

Talk 6. Rory Naismith

Rethinking Offa, king of the Mercians (757-96)

Offa was one of the last great Anglo-Saxon kings to dominate England before the rise of Wessex in the ninth century. Yet he remains something of an enigma, known largely from very critical sources that come either from outside his kingdom or much later. It is possible to redress this balance to some degree by

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considering the major monuments produced within Offa's own domains during his reign: the charters and the coins. Together, these show him on something closer to his own terms. He emerges as ambitious and prone to jealousy, but also someone who harboured a strong idea of his own importance, and of the royal family as a unit. Offa may have failed in his ambition of establishing a dynasty, but he certainly changed the game of Anglo-Saxon kingship.

Talk 7. Levi Roach

The Fury of the Northmen: The Vikings in England from Alfred to Æthelred

The Vikings were one of the most dynamic factors in the history of medieval England. While the first recorded attack on Lindisfarne in 793 is perhaps the most famous, it is the armies which beset England in the reigns of Alfred the Great (871–899) and Æthelred the Unready (978–1016) which were to have the most lasting impact. Without them, would have been no unified kingdom of England as we know it; there would also have been no Norman Conquest.

THURSDAY 13th AFTERNOON

Session 3: 3pm to 5pm

Plenary

Talk 8. Martin Carver

Formative Britain – as told by archaeology

This talk explores the story of Britain between the end of Roman rule and the Norman Conquest, the fifth to 11th centuries CE – but unusually, as a tale told by archaeology. Five themes of archaeological discovery provide our framework: people, houses and settlements, death and burial, monumentality (sculpture, churches and illuminated manuscripts) and materiality in words (myths and written records). The result shows an island of great diversity, its political theatre at first focused on single male leadership, then on spirituality and then putting its faith in wealth. This 700-year journey – in which the English had an increasing role – formed the Britain of today.

FRIDAY 14th

Session 4: 9.45am to 12.30pm

Talk 9. Michelle Brown

Anglo-Saxon Art, Saints, Scholars and Vikings

The Viking impact was a catalyst to the coalescence of nation states in Britain, Ireland and parts of continental Europe, as well as Scandinavia. Anglo-Saxon England emerged

from the raids and resistance of the ninth century with a renewed commitment to its cultural identity and faith, and to regaining the Danelaw through conversion and conquest, occasioning trans-cultural exchange. The Benedictine reform movement fostered artistic flowering, whilst renewed, royally-sponsored Scandinavian attacks in the late tenth century led English scholars to stock their libraries with anthologies of English poetry, science and sermons. For the brief time that England formed part of Cnut's international Scandinavian trading empire, patronage of ostentatious arts flourished, reflecting complex relations that would culminate in England clashing with the Northmen in 1066, related in the Bayeux Tapestry

Talk 10. Rory Naismith

Late Anglo-Saxon Ely: a Monastery and its World

The medieval Cathedral of Ely, the 'ship of The Fens', dominates the flat, watery landscape around it. Yet it attained pre-eminent position in the region more than a century before the present building was even begun. Ely was refounded around 970 by the vigorous monastic reformer St Æthelwold (d. 984). Like other monasteries, it benefited from Æthelwold's lavish patronage, but unlike others, Ely has preserved detailed records of how that growth was accomplished – of deals with everyone from local farmers to major aristocrats. It also preserves several remarkable sources that illustrate its links with the surrounding population, among them a list of serf families, a very rare set of Old English records of land management, and one of the first guild regulations from anywhere in medieval Europe. Together, these sources provide a remarkable insight into both the monastery and the population it dealt with.

Talk 11. Marc Morris

The Anglo-Saxons: Myth and Reality

Ever since the Norman Conquest, the English have looked back on the Anglo-Saxon era with nostalgia and tended to regard it as a golden age. Pre-Conquest kings were elected and the Church was more pristine; women had better rights than they did in later centuries, and people in general enjoyed greater freedom. But how much of this is true, and how much of it is the product of wishful thinking?

The order of talks may be subject to change.