

# AWAKE! And search for the Saxon spirit

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ATTEND! In my opinion, this word is the finest opening anyone has ever thought up to any piece of writing. It instils a much-needed sense of urgency into the reader, who is all too often moping around in a dressing gown and reluctant to launch into a whole article, let alone a book.

I would like to claim that I thought it up myself, but no. It is the opening of Beowulf, and I quote it now in its entirety to show that the Anglo-Saxons did things first and did them best.

And now answer me this. Why is it that we have a clear picture of all historical periods — the Romans, the Elizabethans, the Tudors, the lot (we know about their clothes, their buildings, their battles, their habits) — and yet have no image of the Anglo-Saxons, the most important people in our history?

If I examine that great dark pit which I like to call my understanding of the past, I find only two certain facts. The Anglo-Saxons went to war in primitive-looking pyjamas, and buried their dead in ships (not the other way round, as you might expect).

From my early study of a Ladybird illustrated volume, I recall that the Anglo-Saxon encampment was not a place to spend your holidays. It was very like the future according to the Green party, with everyone in simple huts, combing their hair with antler fragments.

Why is it that the British' totally ignore the people who founded their race, society, government, attitudes and characteristics? We haven't even got a theme park devoted to them.

Why do we persist in thinking that the Romans brought civilisation to this country when we were the only significant part of their, empire to throw out their language, law, culture and lifestyle as soon as they were on the banana boat" home? By the time they docked in bella Italia, all the Brits had left was London, straight roads and a few crummy viaducts.

Failing that, we think civilisation begins here with the arrival from over the Channel of the Norman smartypants. If you go into the gift shop at Windsor Castle and look at the illustrated chart of English kings, you will see that it goes back to William the Conqueror and talks of an Edward I when he was surely Edward IV (there being three, perfectly good Anglo-Saxon Edwards before him).

It is a serious and important question why the English think their history begins in 1066, which conquest obliterated our English roots. Why, even now, do we eradicate our origins?

Tomorrow, the [International Society of Anglo-Saxonists](#) (attend! this matters) pitch up from all corners of the globe to discuss our early history for seven days solid, with only tea breaks and outings to Fountains Abbey to restore them. Even here, the English are not interested in their beginnings. The society was founded by a Belgian and three-quarters of the membership is American.

None the less, I have taken this opportunity to pester the world's leading authorities on the subject to get to the bottom of this whole thing.

I can now confirm that the Anglo-Saxons gave us our language, our counties, our place names, our common law, our taste for living in villages, our idea of an English kingdom from Offa's Dyke to the Tamar, our first vernacular literature and our political constitution. In short, they gave us our social, legal and civil roots and our whole notion of Englishness. In smaller details also they are our parents. They gave us, for example, our taste for nostalgia, being themselves in permanent lamentation for a golden age just passed.

They first came up with the English notion (now abandoned) of fair play. There is a poem concerning the Battle of Maldon in AD 991 which depicts the Vikings stranded on an island in the Thames estuary. They ask the Anglo-Saxons to let them cross to the mainland so they can have a more even fight. The Anglo-Saxons agreed and were comprehensively thumped. Jolly good sports, though.

What is more, the English attitude to government is a thousand years old and the Anglo-Saxons would have immediately understood our rag-bag of largely hostile feelings towards Mrs Thatcher.

We don't like our governments (any of them), but we go along with them. Only when we are pushed too far do we revolt. This approach can be traced right back to the Anglo-Saxon period when the dynasty/of King Alfred invented it.

As the heathen Danes invaded, Alfred said: "Look, I may not be much, but I am ordained by God and the only other choice is the Danes, who eat raw pig for breakfast, spit in cathedrals and look like Mike Gatting." The kings of Wessex did brilliantly with this line in the 12th century, and the Tudors managed to keep it up even though they were hanging all their political opponents.

We endure our governments because we have been rigorously trained for 10 centuries in the idea that, however bad they are, the alternative is going to be much, much worse. (See the Labour party, 1979-1989.)

I find there are three reasons why we ignore our founders. First, the Anglo-Saxons left us with few buildings to fire the imagination. Most are just ugly, squat, slab-like churches that should really be pulled down. Second, they arrived as barbarians and ended up largely effete and famous for tapestry. They changed so much while forging the English character that they are difficult to pin down.

Third, royalty and aristocracy can only trace themselves back to 1066 and no further. So, the ruling classes have made a systematic attempt to ditch the Anglo-Saxons by omission and propaganda.

' This is our loss. Today, there is a crisis in Englishness. Are we polite or rough? Are we Europeans? Who are we? And why do we feel apologetic about being English? In this hour, the Anglo-Saxons should be our model.

It was the last period in our history when England was a self-contained unit with no foreign lands, but enjoying happy relations with the continent because we were secure in our identity.

You do not hear other European nations bleating about losing their sovereignty in 1992 because they know their roots and who they are. Get thee to Durham, Margaret. Read Bede and think on.

#### REFERENCE

1. International Society of Anglo-Saxonists website: <http://www.isas.us/>