

Chapter 1

A Historical Survey

The first inhabitants of Britain:

Of the first inhabitants of Britain, the people who lived there during the Stone Ages, little is known. However, there is the notion that they came from the Mediterranean regions, wore skins of animals, knew how to use fire and lived in caves.

About 600 BC they were conquered by the Gaels who belonged to the Celtic race. These were later joined by another group of the Celtic race who came to Britain from Europe, and these “Brythons” (Britons) were so-called from the Celtic word “brethyn” (cloth-wearing). They settled in the Southern fertile half of the island, looking after their sheep and land. They worked in iron and some of them knew how to make bronze by mixing copper and tin. They also learned the working of gold and jet ornaments, growing of corn and using the plough from the more civilized people of the Mediterranean who reached the southern shores of Britain by trading.

It was for bronze, gold and corn that the Romans came and drove the Britons to the ragged hilly parts of Scotland, Wales and Cornwall, as well as over the sea to Ireland and the Isle of Man. There they lived on as a separate race with a civilization and literature of their own, but their stories and poetry afterwards crept into English and enriched it considerably.

The Romans invade Britain:

In the year 55 BC the Britons who had been accustomed to see the Roman traders on their shores, were alarmed to see a well-equipped Roman army invading their country. Caesar, a Roman general, being in Gaul, decided to invade Britain because his enemies, the Gaulish chiefs, were taking refuge there, and also to get rid of the Druid Priests who were a great menace to the Romans and who had their headquarters in Britain.

Cæsar's first attempt to invade Britain failed because of the fierce opposition put up by the Britons and in consequence, he had to retreat to Gaul. He made another attempt in the year 54 BC but failed and the relation between the Britons and the Romans was merely commercial. This relation extended over a period of about ninety years during which Christ was born in Judea, a Roman Province.

In the year 43 C. E. the Emperor Claudius was master of Rome which was at that time more powerful than ever. Wanting to add Britain to the Roman Empire, Claudius sent an army of about 40,000 men to conquer it. Although the inhabitants, encouraged by the Druids (the British priests), put up a fierce opposition, the country was eventually conquered. There remained, however, certain parts such as Wales and Cornwall that kept on resisting the unwanted conquerors.

In the year 78 C. E. Rome sent a new kind of governor to Britain, a man named Agricola who succeeded indeed in making peace although he was always annoyed by certain tribes who were still encouraged by the Druids. Agricola sympathized with

the conquered Britons and tried to teach them how to keep peace, to build towns and roads on the Roman type and to learn Latin. Furthermore, the Britons were instructed in how to measure their fields and Britain became then an important wheat-growing country.

Under Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor, the Britons were converted to Christianity. This brought the Britons into closer contact with the rest of the Roman Empire. This contact brought laws, order, protection, a new civilization and a new language to the country.

The Anglo-Saxons invade Roman - Britain⁽¹⁾:

The fierce tribes of the Anglo Saxons and Jutes, whose homes were in Jutland and round the mouths of the Weser and Elbe, raided the southern and eastern shores of Britain constantly between the years 350 to 500.

As long as the Roman garrisons defended Britain, the Saxon raiders had been content to make sudden attacks on the villages along the coasts and run away with their plunders. But, when the Roman garrisons were called back to Italy as the entire Roman Empire was being attacked by all sorts of “Barbarians”, the Britons were left helpless and the Saxons succeeded in invading the country and settled there with their families. First came the Jutes about the year 450, and conquered Kent and as far along the southern coast as the Isle of Man. The Saxons followed them south and farther west and then came the Angles who settled

(1) The Anglo Saxons and Jutes were all known as Saxons to the Roman Britons.

along the Eastern coast and gave their name to the whole country Engaland or England.

Since the Saxons did not have the Roman idea of living in peace with the conquered people, they destroyed all the villages and towns and suffocated the civilization which was about to flourish. In consequence, the majority of the Roman Britons fled to Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Cumberland.

Less things were grown and made in Britain in the time of the Saxons than under the Romans. However, they set down the rules and customs of the country in the “Dooms of Ine”, and had the “Witan”, or the council of the elder nobles who helped the king in ruling the country and who formed the beginning of a constitutional government. They were also fond of a kind of literature shown in their poems about Wayland and Beowulf. Although their monks and monasteries tried to spread learning among the people, progress was very slow because of the constant fighting between the small kingdoms inside the country.

King Alfred was typical of the Anglo - Saxon Kings. He was a learned man, ambitious, keen, travelled twice to Rome and tried during all his life to improve conditions of learning in England as well as defending the country against the (Viking) raids. He not only saved England from the Danes, but probably perverted The Anglo-Saxon speech from being completely absorbed or up-rooted. He brought over scholars from the Continent and himself translated into English a number of Latin books. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was certainly encouraged if not begun by him, and in it were set down the events and curious

happenings of the time. It has provided scholars with an almost continuous history of England right up to the Norman Conquest and beyond.

The Danes (Vikings) invade England (England):

The Danes, who were tribes coming from Norway, Sweden and Denmark, raided the shores of England from 350 C. E. onwards. They were fiercer fighters than the Anglo-Saxons to whom they were related and spoke a similar language, but they still worshipped heathen gods and spent their days in war and plunder. Although they had little civilization and no written literature, they were fond of reciting or singing their sagas or long narrative poems of their gods and heroes.

To the Danes, barren homelands provided little food or comfort so they became sea-robbers and made repeated attacks on England. They burned down homes, carried away cattle and drove the villagers to seek shelter in the forest. They destroyed the churches and monasteries and burned the parchment books they lay hands on. Although King Alfred and his successors fought bravely against the Danes, yet by the year 1000 they had more than one - half the country and in 1019 the Anglo-Saxons were forced to accept the Dane, Canute, as their king.

Although the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes spoke different forms of the same parent language, yet as they mixed together in church, in the market-place and at work, they exchanged many words and the two languages were gradually amalgamated.

The Normans invade England:

Taking advantage of the small fights which were taking place among the chiefs of England, each of whom claimed his right to the throne, William, the Duke of Normandy, landed in England in 1066. His army was stronger and better trained and equipped than any Anglo-Saxon force. William fought Harold, the last of the Anglo-Saxon Kings, and killed him at the Battle of Hastings. Then he led his army cautiously to London while the Anglo-Saxons were quarrelling: one group wanted to fight and another wanted to come to terms with him. Meanwhile, William who was strongly encamped, decided to wait and see what came of all this. As he waited, a deputation came and offered him the crown, and he at once accepted it and began to advance towards London, laying waste the villages as he passed through. There was for the time no more resistance and on Christmas Day 1066 William was crowned at Westminster Abbey. His coronation took place less than three months after his victory at Hastings, but it took him more than five years to get command of the country. First of all, various parts of the North rebelled against him, then Cornwall, Devon, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Yorkshire and Northumberland all rose at different times. But it was in vain that they tried to get rid of him; William was a great fighter and a strong enemy.

Had the Battle of Hastings merely resulted in winning a crown for William of Normandy, the French contribution to the English language might have been very limited and specialized. But, in order to conquer England, William had had to collect an army

and had got to gather men from many parts of France by promising them land and other rewards if he won. So, after his victory at Hastings and after crushing the various rebellions against him, he took the lands of English Leaders and shared them with his followers. In the same way, the best posts in the English Church were given to French priests and bishops. Furthermore, the King of England, being still Duke of Normandy, vast regions of France were subject to English rule under the Angevin Kings. During the Hundred Years War there were continual commercial and political dealings between the two countries. All this gave impetus to the use of the French language in England, especially after the great prestige of French medieval literature had made the language almost international.