

Learning: The Anglo-Saxons

Life for the Anglo-Saxons

After the end of the Roman occupation of Britain, around 410AD, there ensued a struggle for control of the British isles. Invading tribes had already **posed a threat** in these parts under Roman occupation. **Signal stations** had been built along what is now the **Yorkshire coastline**, including at Scarborough and Filey, to warn of attack from the sea.

The following centuries were dominated by inhabitants from **invading tribes**. The Angles (from whom we get the name 'Angle-land' or England) and the Saxons were both Germanic tribes. They **created kingdoms** across the country. The region of the North York Moors, where Ryedale Folk Museum is located today, was originally in the kingdom of Deira, with Elmet to the west and Bernicia to the north. These areas were united to form Northumbria, literally meaning the people to the north of the Humber.

It was a large and important kingdom and continued to be fought over. Part of the kingdom was conquered by the Danes - Vikings from Denmark - and became known as the Danelaw. This is why we have many Anglo-Saxon **and** Viking place names in this part of Yorkshire.

Saxon names include -

- Brough, borough or burgh for fort
- Feld and field for field
- Dene for valley
- Ham and wick mean farm or farmstead

Meanwhile, Viking words include -

- Beck for stream
- Dale for valley
- Kirk for church
- Thorpe for small village

These resources have been created to help you learn a bit more about **daily life in these parts for the Anglo-Saxon people**, although it should be remembered that this period of history also overlapped with Viking occupation.

We know a little bit about the life of some Anglo-Saxons here from archaeological evidence, for example a sixth-century brooch from Bulmer, near York, and the grave of a young woman which was found near Hawnby in the North York Moors. She had gold and silver hair pins, a stone spindle whorl and a bronze bowl. Burials like this give us great insights into life for some people, though they were not always typical.

For most ordinary Anglo-Saxons, life would have been hard and survival uncertain. At Ryedale Folk Museum, you can explore our **simple, single-room dwelling**, with earth floor, an open fire in the centre and living quarters shared with animals.

Daily life

Try our virtual mini workshop.

If you're planning a trip to Ryedale Folk Museum, your students can take part in our **virtual workshop** before their visit. Alternatively, the workshop could be used as a standalone resource for anyone unable to visit us.

In the video, you can meet an **Anglo-Saxon housewife**, trying her best to keep up with the chores. She won't know what to make of your students! You'll discover what jobs ordinary peasants, known as ceorls (pronounced churls), would have had to do in Anglo-Saxon times and how children today would have been viewed as adults from the age of 10, although everyone would have been expected to work, even toddlers.

Watch the **workshop video in advance** so you know what to expect, then encourage your students to call out answers to the questions and take part actively. Afterwards, you could talk about what surprised the children about life in Anglo-Saxon times. What chores would they prefer to do?



Find the link to this video on the web page where you have downloaded these notes – or go to the Museum's YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/@ryedalefolkmuseumyo626ua>

Explore our Crofter's Cottage

If you are planning an educational trip to Ryedale Folk Museum, we would encourage you to talk to your students about what they will see here. This footage will prepare students for where they are coming.



Find the link to this video on the web page where you have downloaded these notes – or go to the Museum's YouTube channel:

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Questions to Talk About

As you watch the film footage or explore the space as part of a school visit, you can talk about the similarities to, and differences from, our homes today. You could also discuss some of the following questions with your class.

How many rooms were in an Anglo-Saxon house?

During Anglo-Saxon and Viking times, the homes of poorer people often only had one room in which all daily tasks were completed - unlike today when we have separate spaces for cooking and sleeping. Some wealthier families would have had an additional room for sleeping, sometimes reserved for the parents.

Why do you think the house was dark?

You'll probably notice that the dwelling doesn't have any window glass - any windows would be very small to prevent draughts from entering the house and they would be kept covered in bad weather and at night, for example with shutters. In a time long before electricity, this would mean that buildings were very dark.

Any light would be from candles or oil lamps, or from the central fire.

Why is there a fire in the centre of the room?

The fire would have been important, not just for warmth, but also for the cooking. Mealtimes were important and we know from stories of the period that feasting was seen with excitement! People used their fingers to eat as they wouldn't have had cutlery.

Though lots of foods which we're used to enjoying wouldn't have existed, Anglo-Saxons still enjoyed a varied diet, with fruit (blackberries, raspberries, plums and apples), vegetables (onions, carrots, cabbage and peas), milk, cheese and bread. They also farmed animals which gave them meat (cows, pigs, sheep, goats and chickens) and fished.

What was the quern stone for?

The Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings grew wheat, barley and rye and used these to make bread - the quern stone was needed to grind the grain as part of preparation for baking.

The quern in the Anglo-Saxon style home is a beehive-quern (which is the shape of a beehive). This was an improvement on the traditional quern stone. Grains were poured into the central hole and the handle was turned in a circular motion. This rotational movement allowed the grains to be ground more efficiently and evenly, helping to remove the husk and produce a finer flour.

What colours were the materials, such as clothing and curtains, in the Anglo-Saxon house?

Materials were made from natural resources, such as wool, from sheep, or linen, from flax. The colours in the Anglo-Saxon style home seem less bright and varied than our own because they would all need to be made from natural materials, including dyes and brighter colours would have required more time-consuming work to make.

Accessories such as leather belts and metal-work brooches were also greatly valued and would have been worn by those who could afford them.

Why did the animals sleep inside the house?

Bringing livestock inside the home at night would help protect them from wild animals such as foxes or wolves. It would also protect their animals from the elements. Some creatures would be brought in for the whole of winter. But it did mean that houses would have been much dirtier and less hygienic than today.

At Ryedale Folk Museum – planning your visit

During an educational visit, you'll be able to explore our simple Anglo-Saxon style home with your students.

Inside the building, your students can **mime some of the chores** mentioned in the workshop video - for example, milking the cows, churning the butter, sweeping the floors after the pigs made a mess, bringing water in from the stream, chopping the firewood, making candles, and grinding the grain for bread.

Don't forget to download and **photocopy Spotter Sheets** to help your students explore the space.

If you want to **tell stories in the Manor House**, don't forget to prepare some in advance. You can use our resources to help you.

You can also create Anglo-Saxon-style riddles at Ryedale Folk Museum using our **worksheet** to help.

Booking Information

You can book self-led visits to our site by emailing info@ryedalefolkmuseum.co.uk or by calling 01751 417367.

The cost of a self-led group visit is £6 per child including VAT, with an accompanying adults visiting for free.

The Anglo Saxons

The Anglo Saxons period is from 410AD to 1066AD a period of around 600 years.

Look around the crofter's cottage and the garden behind it and see what you can spot. Tick off the items as you find them.



curtains



Houses were very cold in the winter. The curtains around the bed kept the heat in.

quern stone



This is a stone for grinding wheat to make flour. Flour was used to make flat breads, cooked over the fire.

yoke



This device sits on the shoulders and allows a person to carry two full buckets, spreading the weight evenly.

toilet



Anglo Saxons went to the toilet outside in a hole. When the hole was full, they would cover it and dig a new one.

windows



Glass was very expensive, so people would cover windows with skins to keep the cold air out but let the light in.

garden



Anglo Saxons grew herbs and vegetables. Herbs were used for medicine as well as flavouring food.

animal pen



Animals were kept in the house and lived with the people.

ham



Anglos Saxons would use smoking as a way to preserve food and make it last longer.

bowl



People were skilled at making items from what was around. These bowls would have been made from wood found nearby.

cooking pot



Metal cooking pots were treasured items, and were passed down through family groups.

rush hat



Rush hats were woven from rushes found in wetland areas.

drinking horn



Horn was the plastic of the time and was used for many things from drinking vessels to making lanterns.

cruck frame



Cruck houses get their name from the long oak beams, shaped like the letter A.

thatch



People built their houses using local materials. Thatch is the stalks of the wheat plant.

open fire



The open fire burned in the middle of the room and the smoke found its way out through the thatch.



Here Be Dragons

Storytelling in Manor House.

Many Anglo-Saxon stories feature dragons, often going to great lengths to protect their treasures. The Anglo-Saxons also liked to embellish jewellery, such as brooches, and even armour, with the twisting shapes of these worm-like creatures. They also told dragon stories, such as that featured in the famous Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*.

If you want to have an atmospheric story time in the style of the Anglo-Saxons, you could take your group to the Manor House at Ryedale Folk Museum for storytelling. The setting of a large hall is reminiscent of the Hall of Heorot from the story of *Beowulf*, where stories were told.

This story is adapted from the Ryedale legend of the Nunnington Dragon, but you can make further changes during your storytelling too.

- Help your group to bring the story to life by miming putting on the spikey armour like Peter. Be careful not to get spiked! How would they feel as they approached the dragon's lair?
- What other actions could you add to the story?
- What do they think the dragon looked like – you students can add their own descriptions.

The Nunnington Dragon

Nobody went near the den in those days. The smell festered all summer, noxious fumes swirling down the valley. When Peter Loschy passed through the village with his little dog, he held his nose.

"How can you bear the smell?" the young knight asked. "It's... it's unpalatable."

John the blacksmith shrugged. Most of the villagers looked away. Peter tried to rouse them to a fury. "Aren't you angry," he asked, "about what the beast has done to you?"

Too many villagers had been taken by then – too many to count. Yes, they were angry once. But Peter's question was returned by blank-eyed stares and dark eyes glassy like a frog's.

At last he said: "I'll get him!" because it seemed the most obvious sort of thing to do.

Perhaps Peter expected praise or gratitude, but all he got in return was a tut or two and a shaking of heads. "I will get him!" he said to John.

"Or he'll get you..."

There's a trick to defeating a dragon, be they serpents or worms, of the flying kind or squirming in the dirt. You just need to plan it all out.

"You stay here," Peter told his dog. "Keep safe."

Then Peter fashioned for himself a very great suit – a very clever suit, or so he thought. John had told him that the beast's method of inflicting death was to coil around its prey and squeeze. Squeeze the living breath out of them.

Patiently, John helped Peter to bejewel his suit with a thousand spikes, razor-sharp. It shimmered as though it were a very special thing indeed. [MIME.]

When Peter approached the den, the sun danced upon his back and sword so that the serpent paused before it wound around him as it had done many times before. Slowly it coiled, slowly, round and up... [ADD DESCRIPTION OF DRAGON.]

Then... A squeal, which cut the air. The creature reared. His prey was free.

Dragon blood is very strange, the texture gloopy and unnatural, it seemed to Peter then. He felt his head turn dizzy at the sight and smell. But the dragon did not fall, though he'd been deeply pierced by Peter's suit. Instead, it rose again. Peter watched, astonished, to see the ribboned flesh restore.

"How?" he gasped. How, indeed, can a dragon heal? But Peter didn't have time for a question like that. The dragon rose and Peter raised his sword. But even the most deadly stab was healed at once.

All morning, Peter stabbed and speared. He pierced and wounded. But by afternoon, he was tiring. His breath came sharp and ragged then until he found himself cowering beneath a rock. He wouldn't last much longer.

But something nuzzled against Peter's hand, something soft and warm. His little dog. "You were supposed to keep safe," he whispered. "No matter, I'm glad you came."

Peter felt his spirits restored. Reaching forward, he hacked the serpent's tail. Thwack! And something changed.

The little dog seized the piece of dragon flesh and ran, and ran. He bounded over tufts and hedges. At the churchyard, he buried the tip of tail before returning to take a claw. All day they fought like this. Peter hacked. The little dog carried. Smaller and smaller the dragon shrank, piece by piece until at last it was dispatched. **The end.**

In the original story, both Peter and his little dragon die at the end after the dog licks Peter with poisoned dragon blood. If you decide to share this other ending (below), you could discuss which you think is best.

If you like happy endings, now is the time to stop. Let's leave them there, on that hillside, man and dog, companionable and still, to take a moment to enjoy their victory. Let's not tell the end of the tale, of how the exhausted knight fell to rest, and how his faithful dog, his face smeared in poisoned blood, tried to revive him and with that friendly toxic lick sealed his young master's fate. Let us leave them resting only, on Loschy Hill together.

Riddling the Anglo-Saxon Way

The Anglo-Saxons loved to challenge their friends and test their wits with tricky riddles and word puzzles. Can you solve some of these?

1. The more you take, the more you leave behind. What am I?
2. I have cities but no homes, forests but no mention of trees. What am I?
3. What comes once in a minute, twice in a moment, but never in a thousand years?

Anglo-Saxon riddles could be quite long, like this.



I have a shiny coat, round and bright.
I vanish in the day, but come out at night.
I'm a keeper of time.
Now you've read my rhyme.
What am I?

Now write your own! (You may want to do this in pairs or threes.)



Look for objects around Ryedale Folk Museum that you could write a riddle about.

What will you choose? (Keep your answer secret from other groups).

Step 1: Think about how you would **describe it**.

Is there something interesting, surprising, or unique about it that you can use in your riddle?

Does it have any special features or do anything different?

Brainstorm your ideas here.

Step 2: Think of clues – how can you describe your object whilst trying to disguise it. Try to **think of 2 or 3 ideas**.

Remember, the moon doesn't really have a coat, though it is shiny. You can be creative with your ideas!

Step 3: Once you've got your ideas, begin to write out your riddle on the back of this sheet (or on a separate piece of paper). Try to **make your lines rhyme**. Experiment with different words until you get it right.

1.

2.

3.

Finally: **Test your riddle** by sharing it with another group. You can always make changes if they find it too hard or too easy.