

## What was Anglo-Saxon England like? – Knowledge Organiser

### 1. Who's who in Anglo-Saxon society?

- There were very few people – two million in the whole of England
- The majority of Anglo-Saxons were **Peasants** who rented small farms and worked for themselves. They worked for the local lord as well. If they did not work for the lord, they could lose their right to use the land.
- There were a group of peasants called **Ceorls** – these were free peasants who were not tied to their land and could work for another lord if they wished. They still had to carry out some services for their local lord in order to farm the land.
- 10% of the population were **slaves** who could be bought or sold. Having slaves was normal in Anglo-Saxon England. If they committed crimes they were not punished as harshly as it would affect their work ability.
- **Thegns** were local lords. There were between 4000-5000 by 1060. A thegn held more land than peasants and lived in a manor house with a tower and a church. Thegns were aristocratic in class and were seen as warriors.
- **Earls** were the most important men in the country after the King. The earls were loyal to the King. The King would reward Earls with land, titles and honour for their service and devotion. There were a total of 5 Earldoms in England in 1060.

**Anglo-Saxon** – those that settled in England after the Romans left

**Aristocracy** – people with the most wealth and power (inherited)

### 2. How well-organised was Anglo-Saxon government?

- Half the country (**Danelaw**) was Anglo-Danish. Many were descendants of Viking invaders who had kept some Danish laws instead of Anglo-Saxon ones. Although they accepted the rule of the King, it was a threat to the power of the King.
- In 1060 the King was the most powerful person in the country. The **Witan** was a council that advised the King on issues of government and was made up of the most important aristocrats in the kingdom – they discussed possible threats from foreign invaders, religion and land disputes. The Witan was also responsible for approving a new king. The King did not have to follow the Witan's advice. The King oversaw who would be appointed to the Witan and when it was to meet.
- **Earldoms** were introduced in 1015 by the Viking King Cnut. Each Earldom (e.g. Wessex) was governed by an Earl. Earls were responsible for collecting taxes, they oversaw justice and legal punishments in their earldom and had great military power. However, the Earls power relied on the support of the Thegns in their Earldoms.

### 3. How was local government organised?

- Earldoms were divided into **shires** – each shire had its own court, the shire reeve acted as the king's representative in their shire, each shire had a **burh** (fortified town) and each shire provided troops for the **Fyrd** (army). Shires were divided into **hundreds** (100 hides of land) and hundreds into **tithings** (a tenth of a hundred). At the base of the whole system was the **hide**. Each hide of land carried obligations – payments of taxes and military service.
- **Shire Reeves (sheriffs)** – were the king's local government officials and they worked within the earldoms to look after the king's interests and carry out his orders. They collected taxes, revenue and fines as well as enforcing the law and provided men for the Fyrd and the upkeep of roads and fortifications.
- **Fyrd** – each group of five hides had to provide one man for the fyrd. The **select fyrd** gathered men to fight anywhere and the **general fyrd** who would only fight in their local area. They provided 40 days service.

**Blood Feud** – if someone was killed, you could kill someone from the murderer's family

**Economy** – the systems in which a country makes money

### 4. What were Saxon towns and villages like?

- 1066 – 10% of population lived in towns. Each shire had its main town. These fortified burhs were well planned so no one was more than 15/20 miles away from safety. They were linked by roads so troops could travel quickly. They had strong walls and ramparts guarded by men from the town. Administration and upkeep of the town was the responsibility of the burhs inhabitants. Burhs were trading hubs. By 1060 London and York had more than 10,000 inhabitants, whilst Norwich and Lincoln had around 6,000. Towns became very important because of international trade.
- Villages were home to much of the population. They were often isolated homes with farms scattered around the countryside. Houses were made of wood and thatched. Many relatives living together. Manor houses were better built than peasant huts. Thegns often built a church on their land and employed priests – could provide services for the surrounding area. It was a very simple and humble existence in villages.

### 5. How should historians describe Anglo-Saxon England?

- Life was hard and life expectancy was low because of high rates of infant mortality
- Population of under two million – majority of population lived in small villages and farmed land for their lord and themselves as a means of survival.
- It had a strong government
- It had a prosperous economy and traded internationally with Denmark, Ireland, Germany, France as well as Flanders and Normandy
- England was Christian, but Christian teachings were mixed with ancient beliefs. Religion was fundamental to everyday life and the church had great influence.
- There was a constant threat of invasion by the Vikings who had raided and plundered for many years prior.
- In return for land, it was expected that a man would owe military service to his lord.
- The King ruled all of England, apart from those set out according to Danelaw. He appointed Earls to rule Earldoms on his behalf. He was the most powerful individual.

**Geld Tax** – tax on land to pay off Vikings that went to the King

**Hundreds** – 100 hides of land (unit of land administration)

**Housecarls** – highly trained troops that stayed with their lord (bodyguard)