

The Making of England

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Thursday 15 January to 19 March 2026

As ever, the following schedule is a declaration of intent and there may be some shuffling as the course develops.



Week 1: Britannia (15 January)

We start by looking at the Roman conquest and the creation of Britannia. Why did the Emperor Claudius succeed where Julius Caesar failed, and how close did the revolt of the Iceni under Boudica come to destroying Roman influence in the fledgling province? We'll also think about how Rome governed Britannia and why that control never extended to the furthest reaches of Scotland.

Week 2: Exeunt Omnes (22 January)

At the start of the 5th century, after more than 450 years of interest, the Roman state withdrew from Britain. We'll look at why this happened, how it was achieved, and what the immediate consequences were for those, both Roman and British, who remained.

Week 3: Angles, Saxons and Jutes (29 January)

According to the Venerable Bede, in the middle of the 5th century the British King, Vortigern, invited the Saxons here to aid the Britons against incursions by the Picts. And so they came, in three longships, but found the land attractive and the Britons docile, and the initial forces were soon joined by an invincible army drawn from the three fiercest races of Germany, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes, who 'established a stranglehold over nearly all the doomed island'. Today we consider Bede as a source and try to find the truth amidst the apocalyptic vision he describes.

Week 4: Emerging Kingdoms (5 February)

This week we will try to make sense of the patchwork of new territories that emerged as Germanic influence spread through the country. Were there kings and kingdoms or are we looking for local leaders who simply exerted more control through violence?

Week 5: The Battle for Christianity (12 February)

The Church was one of the most significant forces in the making of England. We'll think about the origins and spread of Christianity in these islands and the battle for supremacy between the Irish and Roman traditions. We'll also take a look at the career of St. Wilfrid, a somewhat militant Christian.



Week 6: Offa: a Mercian Charlemagne? (19 February)

There are many kings who might have attracted our attention but we will look at Offa, a contemporary of Charlemagne. We'll consider his territorial ambitions and achievements, his contacts with the Frankish court, and his relationship with the Church. Oh, and what was that dyke all about?



Week 7: Vikings! (26 February)

In the year 793 “terrible portents appeared in Northumbria, and miserably afflicted the inhabitants: there were exceptional flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air, and soon followed a great famine, and after that in the same year the harrying of the heathen miserably destroyed God’s church in Lindisfarne by rapine and slaughter”. Thus *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes the first incursion of the Vikings into England. This week we must find out more about this heathen horde and find out why it was on the move, why the British Isles were so attractive to the Vikings, and whether they entirely deserved their blood-curdling reputation.

Week 8: Alfred the Great (5 March)

This week we turn to a national hero, Alfred the Great. We'll look at his career and try to separate the fact from the fiction as we follow his military actions against the Vikings, his concern for learning and the Church, and also his administrative reforms. In his own time he adopted the title ‘Rex Saxonum’; ‘the Great’ was an accolade granted to him by later generations.

Week 9: A United Kingdom? (12 March)

This week we turn to Alfred’s successors, leading up to Athelstan, described as the first King of England and one of the greatest Anglo-Saxon kings. What were his achievements and why does nobody remember him now? We'll also pick up the story of the Church and see how it was undergoing reform and development at this time.

Week 10: The Return of the North Men (19 March)

Our final session brings us back to the men of the north. How did Cnut become King of England and combine the country into a North Sea Empire with his other kingdoms of Norway and Denmark? And how did the fast-moving events of the thirty years following his death lead to the ultimate victory of the North Men from Normandy?

