

Chapter 2

The Coming of the English

The English come to Britain, A.D. 450

The Britons were in a very miserable state after the Romans left them. Their old enemies the wild Scottish tribes came down again into Britain to kill and steal and burn; and there were not Roman soldiers to defend the great wall and to fight against them. The Britons fought on as well as they could for forty years until they began to despair. They had seen what good fighters the English were when they had come to plunder their shores; so they sent to ask some of them to come and fight for them, and promised them lands and money in return for their help.

A band of English came to Britain led by two chiefs, Hengist and Horsa. They landed at the mouth of the Thames and soon drove the Scots out of Britain; but the Britons did not have peace for all that. The English liked their new land, and more and more of them came over in their boats to find a home in Britain. The Britons did not like this, for the English took away their land and their cattle; so the Britons fought against the English, but the English were stronger than they. The Britons could not fight as well now as they had done when the Romans first came to Britain; for the Romans had taught them to live quietly in their homes and to like comfort. They did not know how to come together and make big armies which might have kept out the English.

For about a hundred and fifty years always more and more English kept on coming; and as the Britons would not make friends with them, and were not strong enough to keep them out, they had to flee from their homes. A great many of them were killed; others died from sickness and want of food. It took the English some time to drive the Britons out of the cities, for they were not used to fighting against cities. Most of the Britons who were not killed fled farther and farther away to the west, where they found safe hiding-places in the hills of Wales and Cornwall, where the English did not care to follow them.

All the rest of the land fell into the hands of the English. The grand buildings which the Romans had made were all ruined, for the English did not care to live in cities. The cities stood empty and half burned down, and the land was covered with the ruins of the fine country houses in which the rich men had lived, and of the empty churches in which no one now prayed to God, for the English were heathens. Men only went on living in a few of the biggest cities, such as York and London. The English did not care to take the religion of the people they had conquered; they brought their own wives with them, and learned from the Britons nothing of all that the Romans had taught them. They spoke their own language, and the language

of the Romans was no longer spoken in the land. That is why we speak a German language and not a Romance language like the French. Perhaps a few British women were kept as slaves, but they were too despised and feeble to teach the English anything.

The English kingdoms

The people whom I have called English was made up of several different peoples called Angles and Saxons and Jutes, and other names besides. But they were all kinsfolk; they came from the same part of Germany, they lived in the same sort of way, prayed to the same gods, and spoke the same language. In time they all came to be called the English, and the land in which they lived was called England.

Before they left Germany only some of the English had kings; but in the new land they felt the need of kings. They chose the men who had led them in battle against the Britons, and who had helped them to gain their new lands, to be their kings. As the English had come at different times and under different leaders, there were many kingdoms in England. After a time, when the English had settled down, seven kingdoms were set up. Each of the seven kings wished to be the greatest and to rule over the others. So they often fought together, and sometimes one was stronger and sometimes another.

How the English became Christians

The English were still very fierce and cruel, and after they had fought together they would sometimes sell to be slaves the prisoners they had taken. Some of these slaves, fair-haired boys and girls, were sent as far as Rome to be sold. As they were standing in the marketplace a good priest called Gregory passed by. He liked their fair faces, and stopped to ask who they were. When he heard that they were heathens he felt sad, and he asked what was their nation; he was told they were Angles. "Angles," he said; "ah, they have the faces of angels, and they ought to be made like the angels in heaven." Some time after this Gregory was chosen to be Pope or Bishop of Rome. When Gregory was Pope he did not forget the fair-haired Angles he had seen or his wish to make them angels. He sent a holy man called Augustine with several other monks to England to teach the English to be Christians. The monks were men who had vowed to give their lives to God, and not to marry or care for any earthly joy.

Augustine comes to England, A.D. 597

Augustine and his monks landed in England on a little island at the mouth of the Thames one hundred and fifty years after Hengist and Horsa had landed there with the first English. That part of England was called Kent,

and there was at that time in Kent a great king called Æthelbert. He married a daughter of a king of the Franks, and his wife, Bertha, was already a Christian. Æthelbert allowed her to bring a priest with her, and she prayed to God in a little church near Canterbury, the chief town in Kent.

Now when Æthelbert heard that Augustine was coming he sent word that he was to stay in the island until he had made up his mind what to do. After a while he came himself to the island and said he would hear what Augustine had to say. He would not go into a house to listen to him, as he was afraid lest Augustine should be a wizard who would bind him by a spell. He sat out on the open down waiting for him. Augustine and his monks came bearing a great silver cross and a picture of our Lord and singing litanies. For a long while Augustine spoke to the king. He could not speak English, but he had a man with him who could, and who said again in English all that Augustine had said in Latin. When Augustine had finished speaking, Æthelbert said, "Your words and your promises are very fair, but they are new and strange, and I cannot make up my mind now to leave off serving the gods of my fathers." But he told Augustine that he should have a house in the city of Canterbury to live in with his monks, and that they might teach the people as much as they liked. Then the king's servants led them to their house, and they went into the town carrying their silver cross and their picture and singing their litanies.

When men saw what a holy life Augustine led, and what good words he spoke, they were willing to be taught by him. Many were baptized and became Christians. After a year the king himself became a Christian, and then the ruined churches were built up again, and many thousands of men flocked to be baptized. Æthelbert was a strong king, and so when he became a Christian many followed his example, not only in his own kingdom but also in the other kingdoms round about. When the Pope heard at Rome how well Augustine had succeeded, he sent more men to help him to teach the English. He sent too the vessels and robes which were needed for the services in the churches and many books for the use of the priests. Augustine was called the Bishop of Canterbury, and ever since these days the Bishop of Canterbury has been the chief of all the bishops in the English Church.

Edwin, King of Northumbria, becomes a Christian, A.D. 627

There was at this time a great king called Edwin reigning in Northumbria, the most northern of the kingdoms of England. He ruled his land well and kept order in it, so that it was said that in his days a woman and her babe might walk from sea to sea and suffer no harm. He had brazen cups fastened to stakes by the springs on the wayside so that the thirsty traveller might drink and be refreshed. There had been no king in England before so great as Edwin, and when he rode through this towns and villages a royal

banner of purple and gold was carried before him. He took for his wife Æthelburg, the daughter of Æthelbert the Christian king of Kent, and she brought with her a Christian teacher called Paulinus.

Paulinus was a very zealous Christian, and he was glad to go with the queen that he might preach the Gospel to the heathen Northumbrians. For some times he preached in vain. Edwin did not care to leave his fathers' gods. But when the queen had a little girl, and Edwin was full of joy at the birth of his daughter, Paulinus asked him whether he would not thank God who had sent him the child. The queen prayed him too that he would serve the true God. Edwin was just going off to fight against his enemies, and he said that if he conquered he would believe that it was God who helped him and would serve Him.

Edwin fought against his enemies and destroyed them, and when he came back he asked Paulinus to teach him about God, and he would often sit alone and think over what Paulinus told him. At last he gathered all his wise men together, for he wished to hear whether they too were willing to become Christians, so that they might all be baptized together. When the wise men heard what Paulinus said, Coifi, who was the chief of the priests of the heathen gods, arose and said, "Hear, O king; no man has served the gods more faithfully than I have, and they have never done anything for me, if this new God will do more for us let us make haste to serve Him."

Then a white-headed old man, one of the chief among the king's followers, arose and said, "The life of man, O king, seems to me like the swift flight of a sparrow through the room where you sit at supper in winter. You sit with all your servants around the hearth fire while without the snow and the rain are raging. The sparrow flies in at one door and out at another. For a moment while he is within he is safe from the wintry storm; but for him the fair weather lasts but for a moment, and he is gone from your sight out again into the dark winter. So it is with the life of man, we see it for a moment, but what went before or what follows after we know not. If therefore this new teaching can tell us anything about this let us hearken to it." The other wise men spoke in the same way.

So when the king found that his wise men thought as he did, he told Paulinus that they were all ready to be baptized and become Christians. Coifi the priest leaped upon a horse, and girding a sword about him, rode in haste to destroy the idols whom he used to worship, and to burn down their temple. The people who saw him at first thought he must be mad, but they soon learned to honor the true God.

Edwin was baptized at York, and he named Paulinus Bishop of York and ordered that there should be built in that city a large and noble church of stone. One the same spot as this old church of Edwin's stands now the beautiful Minster of York.

Penda fights against the Christians, A.D. 633

Edwin reigned gloriously for seventeen years, and by his power the Christian religion was carried among the people round about. But at this time there arose a great king called Penda in Mercia, the kingdom on the border of Wales. Penda was a heathen, and all the men who liked the old gods better than the new faith gathered around him. He fought against Edwin and slew him and his son, and plundered all the kingdom of Northumbria and did many evil deeds there. Paulinus and the queen fled before Penda, and sailed in a ship back to Kent, and for a time it seemed as if the true faith was quite forgotten in the north of England.

Oswald, King of Northumbria, A.D. 634

But after a while a Christian king called Oswald once more arose in Northumbria. He was the son of Edwin's sister, and was a good and brave man. He wished to have Christian teachers for his people again, but he did not send to Canterbury for them.

Before he became king, while he was flying alone before his enemies, he found safe shelter for a while in Iona, a rocky island near the west coast of Scotland, where lived a holy Christian called Columba, who had come from Ireland. Now in Ireland the Christians had not been destroyed as they had been by the English in England; there were still men in Ireland who remembered the faith which the Romans had taught them, and they loved to go and teach the heathens about the true God. So Columba came to Iona, and other holy men gathered around him, and they built a monastery, as the houses are called where monks lived together. These monks used to go and preach the Gospel to the heathens in Scotland.

Oswald had seen what holy men they were while he lived among them, and when he was king he sent to Iona for someone to come and teach his people. So they sent him a man called Aidan, who was so meek and gentle that he soon won the people's love, and they listened to his teaching. Oswald made Aidan Bishop of Lindisfarne, an island off the coast of Northumbria, near the royal city of Bamborough. When the tide is low the sands between Lindisfarne and the land are uncovered and it is only an island at high tide. Here Aidan built a monastery, and from it monks went out to preach among all the people in the north of England.

But Penda the heathen king was still very strong. Oswald fought bravely against him, but was slain in battle. Still the Northumbrians would not obey Penda, and when he came to Bamborough, the great castle which was built on a rock by the sea would not yield. So Penda bade his men pull down the cottages around and pile their wooden planks against the walls of the castle and fire it. Aidan had fled to one of the little rocky Farne islands near the coast. Thence he saw the flames and the smoke rise around the castle. "See,

Lord,” he cried, “what ill Penda is doing.” And men said that after he had cried to the Lord the wind changed and drove the flames back upon those who were trying to burn down the castle.

Oswiu, King of Northumbria, A.D. 642

As Penda grew older he hated the Christians less, and allowed preachers from Lindisfarne to teach his people, and his own son became a Christian. But when Oswald’s brother Oswiu made himself King of Northumbria, Penda still fought against him, for he wished that there should be no other king as strong as himself. So Oswiu fought, and the terrible Penda fled before him and was drowned in a river near the place of battle. After that the faith of Christ was spread through the land and the heathens were never strong enough to fight against it again.

How St. Cuthbert taught the Gospel, A.D. 687

There were now other monasteries in the north besides Iona, and the monks wandered far and wide to teach the people. The holiest of all these monks was a man called Cuthbert. He had been a shepherd boy on the moors in the Scottish lowlands, and, like David, had read in the skies the glory of God. He went to a little humble monastery at Melrose, and when he had learned enough he wandered out to teach others. He was a big strong man, and could climb steep hills and travel on difficult roads. So he went to the miserable villages among the mountains, where the people were rough and poor. But Cuthbert was a peasant too, and he spoke to them in words that they could understand, and so pleasant was his face that all were willing to listen to him and to speak with him. When he came to any village all men would flock together to hear what he had to say. He taught for many years, and at last he left Melrose and went to Lindisfarne, and the fame of his holiness was great. Then wishing to live away from the cares and bustle for the world, he went to one of the little Farne islands, a bare rock where was no living creature except the sea-birds. There with his own hands he built himself a hut and tilled a little field to grow grain for his food. Many people came to see Cuthbert on his island, to hear the wise words that he spoke, and ask his help when they were in trouble.

Cædmon, the first English Poet, A.D. 680

Many monasteries, or convents, were built in the north of England, where people lived together that they might learn from one another and grow wiser and holier. There was a great convent at Whitby, at the head of which was a woman Hild by name, and she was so wise that she taught many men. Near Whitby there lived a cowherd called Cædmon. He was once at a feast where the men, wishing to make merry, called upon each in turn to sing a

song. Cædmon could not sing, and ashamed to think that he would have to refuse when his turn came, he went out to the stable where he was to stay all night to care for the horses. As he slept there appeared before him one who said, "Cædmon, sing some song to me." Then he answered, "I cannot sing; for this cause have I left the feast." Then the man said, "However, thou shalt sing to me." And Cædmon asked, "What shall I sing?" and he bade him "sing the beginning of created beings." Then Cædmon sang verses which he had never heard before. When he awoke, he remembered his dream and the verses he had sung. He went and asked to be led before the abbess Hild and he told her his dream, and he repeated the verses he had made to her and many learned men. One of them translated to him a piece of the Bible and bade him sing that, and the next morning he came back and sang the verses he had made. Then Hild, pleased with the beauty of his verses, said that he must become a monk; and they taught him the stories of the Bible that he might sing them. So Cædmon was the first of the English poets, and his fame added to the glory of Hild's convent at Whitby.

The Church in England, A.D. 644

The Christians in the southern parts of England had all been taught by bishops sent from Rome, and there were some points in which the Roman Christians did not agree with the northern Christians, who had been taught at first by the Irish monks of Iona. When Oswiu, the wise King of Northumberland, saw how quarrels arose because of this he bade the chief bishops from all parts of the land meet together at Whitby and see whether they could come to some agreement. But neither side would give way; and the king, when he had heard what they had to say, said that he was in favor of the Roman customs. Then the northern priests were very sad, and many of them left Northumbria and went back to Scotland.

When the Pope heard what Oswiu had done, he sent a bishop from Rome called Theodore, who had been a monk of Tarsus, where St. Paul was born. Theodore was a wise man. He set the English Church in order, and placed bishops in each kingdom, and made the Archbishops of York and Canterbury head over the bishops of the north and of the south, and the arrangements he made have lasted until this day.

So because of Oswiu's wisdom there was one Church in England, and this helped to make the English feel that though they had many kings they were yet one people, and the Church did much to teach men to be gentler and to care for other things besides fighting.

After the meeting at Whitby Cuthbert still stayed on the Farne Island, and when Oswiu died the next king, Egfrith, sent for Cuthbert and made him bishop. But soon after Egfrith was killed in battle and the greatness of his kingdom came to an end. Cuthbert went back to his island; he was then an old man, and two months afterwards he died, with his last breath

bidding those who gathered around him to live in peace and concord. In later days the great Minster of Durham was built over his body, which men thought had floated thither from Lindisfarne when the Danes laid it waste.

Ini reigns in Wessex, A.D. 688–728

After Egfrith, there was no great king in Northumbria again, but Mercia and Wessex were the greatest of the English kingdoms. Wessex was in the south of England and Mercia in the middle, and the kings of both lands had a great deal of fighting to do against the Welsh, who had fled to the wet part of England. The English drove them farther and farther back until the kingdom of Wessex stretched to the borders of Devon.

Ini was one of the chief kings of Wessex. He was a brave man, and fought much against the Welsh and conquered them. He was wise too, and made good laws for his people; and he built new churches and monasteries, and his people lived in peace. Now Ini had a very pious queen called Æthelburg, and she wanted him to leave his kingdom and go to Rome, and do nothing but pray and do good works for the rest of his life. In those days, though the kings had many houses, they had not much furniture, and when they moved from one house to another in their kingdom their furniture was always packed up and taken with them, and the house was left empty. One day, when Ini and his queen were travelling, Æthelburg bade men drive cattle and pigs into the house after they had left it and fill it with rubbish. Then when they had ridden a little way she said to Ini, “Turn back with me to the house which we have left.” And when they came to it they found the hall where the king had feasted full of cattle, and in the place where the king and queen had slept a litter of pigs. Then the queen said to him, “See how all the glory has gone from this hall;” and she told him how the glory of his life would pass away also, and that he must put away the things of this world and give the rest of his life to God. So Ini to Rome with her, and lived there as a common man for the rest of life, and his son reigned in his stead.

Bede lives at Jarrow, A.D. 673–735

The English were famous in those days for learning and piety. Stone churches were built in many places and they began to use glass for the church windows; before they had used horn and parchment. Many houses were built for monks to live in, and in one of these at Jarrow lived Bede, the first English scholar. He wrote many books, chiefly in Latin, and trained up a band of scholars to work with him. He wrote a history of the English Church, from which we learn all the things I have been telling you. The last thing he did was to translate the Gospel of St. John into English, so that all men might read it. Before he had finished it he fell sick. “Write quickly,” he said to his scholars, for he knew that his last days were come. Until the last the dying old man told them what to write, bidding them from time to time

write quickly. At last the writer said with joy, "It is finished." Then Bede answered faintly, "It is finished indeed;" and soon after, with a prayer on his lips, he died.

Offa rules in Mercia, A.D. 757-796

In Mercia there was a great king called Offa who after Ini's days made all the other kings in England obey him. Offa fought very much against the Welsh too, and he made a great wall of earth called Offa's Dyke to prevent them from coming into his kingdom. This dyke made the boundary between England and Wales, and parts of it can still be seen. Offa's fame reached even to other parts of Europe. In his days one of the most wonderful men whom the world has ever seen, called Charles the Great, ruled over the Franks. Charles several times sent letters to Offa, and Offa sent him a learned Englishman called Alcuin, who lived at Charles' court and wrote books for him.