

4. Builders

Britain is an island. To be more precise it is several islands, two reasonably big ones and about 10 more that most of us could name. There are over 100 inhabited islands, and if you counted every bit of land you could tie a boat to and walk on, there are about 2,000.

Being an island has shaped Britain's history. This essay is about being an island. It's about Britain's land, resources, industries and the significance of being so close to the European continent. It will consider the period of British history 1066-1485.

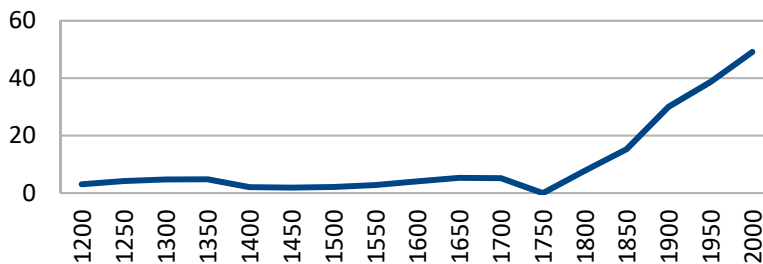
Food and farming

On the very Western edge of Europe it rains a lot. The land is reasonably fertile, if you drain it well. I know a farmer in Lincolnshire who has about 1,000 acres, that's about 4 square km. Most of his land has drainage pipes just below the ground. They were put there hundreds of years ago, but we don't know when. Without them the land would be very wet and a lot less productive.

Farmers have been finding ways to bring more land into cultivation and get the most out of it, continuously, for a very long time. Lincolnshire is close to a lot of reclaimed land (the area around the Wash). Much of it made useable by Dutch engineers hired in the 17th century.

In Roman times agriculture used a light plough with crossed, shallow furrows. The Anglo-Saxons brought the deep plough and used strip farms and the three field system. In around the 10th century, just before the period we will discuss later, the horse collar and pulling tree came from Europe, causing oxen to be gradually replaced by heavy horses. They lasted until the 20th century.

All these things have contributed to Britain's rising population through time. Here is chart showing the estimated population in millions since 1200 c.e.:



Because Britain's main island is irregularly shaped, there is nowhere on it more than 120kms from the sea. It's believed that during Roman times the population was concentrated near the coasts. Britannia was apparently famous for its oysters, which were exported around the empire. A rainy climate is also good for long grass and cows, so sea food and dairy products were the ancient people's main source of protein.

During the Dark Ages, when there were slave trader raids along the coasts, people moved inland. The Anglo-Saxons probably brought a diet more typical of North Central Europe, with a heavy emphasis on pig meat. The sausage, which is ground up pig meat, is spicy in Southern Europe, but savoury in Northern Europe. Britain has a strong tradition of regional varieties of savoury sausage.

In medieval times, Britain (except Scotland) shared an aristocracy with France, whose wealth simulated a high-class cuisine. It's likely that some of its styles trickled down to all levels of society.

The use of pastry in particular, became very common. The British have been wrapping meat in pastry to make pies since at least this time. Later this would also be shaped into the pasty as an extremely popular convenience food.

The staple foods throughout medieval times were oats, barley or rye, and bread or pasta. In modern times, (after the period covered later in this essay) the potato from North America became crucial to industrialisation. It's a highly efficient vegetable in terms of the energy it contains compared to the energy required to grow it. Much of Ireland, where there were still plenty of small farmers well into industrial times, went over to producing potatoes to sell to the new British towns.

All these things would combine and evolve into the modern British diet: dairy products such as cheese and cream, fish (especially North Atlantic Cod), other seafood such as cockles and mussels, meat steaks, flavoured sausages, pies, pasties, bread and potatoes (especially in the form of Chips). This food culture was exported to Britain's colonies, and in return came things like curry from India, tea from South East Asia and coffee from America.

In medieval times, Britain exported a lot of wool to Europe. The rainy and windy climate is good for fast and low grasses like heather, so a lot of Britain, after its forests had been felled, became "moorland". English sheep produced thick, heavy wool that was known in Europe for its warmth. Spinning wool produces yarn which is then weaved into cloth. Many ordinary farming people had spinning wheels and small looms for weaving in their homes. This is important for the later development of trade and industry.

Resources and demography

Minerals are important in a nation's history. In ancient times, Tin was mined in Cornwall. Tin is particularly useful when combined with Copper to make Bronze. The Romans exported it around the Empire, along with Iron and Lead. They also exploited and more-or-less exhausted Britain's easily accessible gold, silver and copper.

In medieval times, monasteries, most of which were branches of French organisations (called "Orders"), played a big role in mining. In the Forest of Dean for example, on the English border with South Wales, there are remains that provide a good example of how communities of monks mined iron. Their efforts helped to make the monasteries rich by the 16th century, with a lot of money flowing out of England to the Orders' headquarters in France.

Britain in ancient and medieval times got most of its energy from wind and water. Windmills and watermills were common. Britain is quite a windy country, and because it is a relatively small, hilly island, has plenty of short, fast flowing rivers that can be used to power mills. In medieval times it is said that there were two wind or water driven mills in every village, perhaps therefore 3,000 across the country.

The energy that would later drive industrialisation however, came from coal, which is found in a seam right across Britain, particularly in South Wales, Yorkshire, County Durham and Scotland. The industry reached a peak in the 19th century and declined in the 20th. In 1901 there were 2,500 deep mines in Britain, and more than 1 million miners. By the 1960s there were only 483 and ½ million miners. In 2000, Britain had 16 deep mines and 13,000 mine staff. Much of this decline can be attributed to the switch from coal to oil. Since the discovery of oil in the North Sea in 1973, Britain has been an oil exporting country, contributing significantly to its wealth.

Apart from resources, geography has contributed to the island's economic development. In medieval times, for example, it was faster to travel over water than over land. In many parts of the world river

banks are naturally shallow and muddy, and difficult to use boats on. British rivers, being typically shorter and faster flowing, have more stable, steeper banks, making them relatively easy to navigate. This made conditions relative easy for canal building, which boomed in the first half of the 19th century. By 1850, the vast majority of British people lived no more than a few kilometres from a navigable river or canal.

Several small and medium sized towns in Britain were built in Roman times. The Anglo-Saxon word for a fortified town was “caester”, which is related to the word “castle”. If you find an English town with the word “chester”, “caister”, “caster” or “ciester” in its name, it was probably a Roman site described as a fortified town by the early Anglo-Saxons.

It was in these cities that the best of medieval building occurred. In them we typically find beautiful cathedrals and impressive castles. In modern times, many of these towns were the strongholds of powerful nobles, and the last to reform their guilds and other restrictions on trade. It was the towns with good conditions for mills, like Leeds and Manchester, or those convenient for coal and canal transport, like Birmingham, that grew faster.

The medieval period considered later in this essay, created some of the ingredients for the industrialisation that followed. Medieval iron mines, for example, grew gradually such that by the first half of the 19th century, Britain was the world's leading producer of the high-carbon, brittle form called “pig iron”. In 1856 a new type of purifying process producing cheap steel was invented by Henry Bessemer, turning Sheffield, where his mill was, into a major city. In 1850 Sheffield produced ½ of the world's steel.

Several other towns, that were little more than villages in medieval times, would later grow. With shipping for example, the towns of Bristol, Southampton, Hull and Newcastle developed. They were outgrown by Glasgow and Liverpool, which a good supply of cheap labour from Ireland and dwarfed by the East End of London, which drew in workers from far and wide.

The City of London was a significant Roman city and survived as a more-or-less self-governing city-state ever since. In modern times, the offices of the finance and trade companies drove out the high concentration of housing in the old city. The phrase “The City” now refers to the financial industry. The wealthiest nearby towns, especially along the river in the West, expanded and were linked together in the late 19th century by large suburban housing estates.

Feudalism

While resources are important for development, probably the most important factors are social. Beginning in late Roman times and extending throughout the dark ages, an institution developed and spread in Western Europe often called “feudalism”. To understand it, you have to imagine a world were raiders are taking and selling people as slaves, killing whoever fights back and destroying settlements. In these conditions people will make sacrifices for protection.

One way that the poorest people can achieve some security is by becoming a “serf”. Although “serfdom” may be thought of as a kind of slavery, there are circumstances when it is better to accept it than be transported for real slavery in a foreign land. Even people who are not so poor may give up some of their rights in return for the protection of a big landowner. This is becoming the “vassal” of a Lord, and usually involves a promise to give military service.

The English language distinguishes between “warlords” and “aristocrats”. A warlord rules by control of an army, while an aristocrat rules by law and convention. In the context of the evolution of feudalism, the line between them is fuzzy. Lords or “nobles” of high status, are really the

descendants of ancient warlords. In the dangerous times of late Rome and the Dark ages, it was agreements for protection that evolved into the conventions of feudalism.

The rights and obligations that feudalism involves tend to be complex. It is typical to have Lords with duties to other Lords, with a bewildering variety of titles (Squires, Barons, Dukes, etc.). At the top is a Royal Family. At the bottom are serfs, and above them are freemen. Peasants, that is to say, self-sufficient farmers, may be freemen or serfs. They may have to pay taxes or work the lands of a Lord. The most important obligation of a serf is not to leave his Lord's land without permission.

Historians generally agree that feudalism, by this definition, had disappeared in England by the end of the 14th century, some say earlier. In other words, while serfs existed earlier, by this time, all the peasants were freemen. During the peasants' revolt of 1389 (which will be mentioned later), the demand to abolish serfdom was made, which seems to contradict this. All we can say with some degree of confidence is that feudalism was waning and would soon become irrelevant.

We can't be sure why this happened. One possible reason is that feudal obligations were considered to be personal and died off with the people who agreed to them. Successive generations replaced duties with work for money. The revival of the money system is probably the best way to understand the process. When a Lord has money it is easier for him to pay a labourer (perhaps a more skilled and reliable one) than to evoke unpopular inherited rights.

The decline of feudalism seems to have occurred throughout Europe, but Britain was amongst the leaders. Perhaps this was because it experienced a succession of generations without the fear of enslavement, and hence no need to renew the obligations of serfdom. Perhaps this relative security is connected with being an island, relatively isolated from the marauders from the East. In fact, after 1066, when England was invaded and fortified, there have been no further successful raids from the sea.

Medieval Europe

As the Anglo-Saxons settled in Britain, in the 5th and 6th centuries, people called the Franks settled in what is now Northern France and North Western Germany. In the 7th century, raids continued from the East. A tribe called the Avars settled in the beautiful, fertile land that we now call the plain of Hungary. From there they carried out continuous raids that helped to strengthen feudalism in Europe.

In 768 a man called Charles became King of the Franks. He would later get the title Charles the Great, normally said in the French form, Charlemagne. His predecessors had conquered territory in the west of France, but he lost it. At this time, it wasn't economics, management of the state or doing justice that measured your rule. In the time of marauders, protection was the overwhelming priority. It was only winning battles that made you a good King.

Charlemagne was psychologically affected by the loss and he was also a very religious man. He seems to have thought that his failures were a sign that he wasn't being Christian enough, so he became more and more preoccupied with the idea of religious duty. He managed to take back all the territory he'd lost and organised an effective fighting machine to gain more.

In 774 he took Lombardy, which then included Rome. This was important for his religious objectives. In 789 he had his Bishops produce what was called The General Admonition, which proclaimed him the new "Josiah", a kind of saviour in the Christian style but less than Jesus (which would have been too much to claim). It set out rules for the conduct of priests and officials, and how Christian education would be organised in schools.

In the same year he began a successful campaign against the Avars while cultivating the image of a good Christian, warrior King. In 799, the Pope, Leo III, was attacked by some rivals in Rome and fled across the Alps, into Charlemagne's protection. On Christmas day 800, the Pope crowned Charlemagne, Holy Roman Emperor. The Avars, were finally subdued in 803.

Much of what we know of all this was written by a monk called Eihard. His "Life of Charlemagne" was written shortly after the Emperor's life and speaks of him as the new Caesar. It is clear that Eihard wanted to create the idea of a "Holy" Roman Empire as a continuation of the old one, without any of those old corrupting pagan influences. It is also interesting that scholars like Eihard encouraged Roman learning, which would become important later as Universities began to evolve.

The following centuries were marked by an improving climate, population growth and a small increase in general prosperity. This is shown by the fact that Christendom, that is to say, the Christian lands, could afford to raise money to send Knights to expand its territory.

Muslims from North Africa had for centuries, ruled the Iberian peninsula. From 1064, the Pope began granting "indulgences", that is to say, forgiveness of sins necessary to enter heaven, to Knights prepared to fight them. Over the next 4 centuries, the period covered in this essay, these Papal blessed knights established Christian kingdoms in the North and gradually expanded southward. The whole peninsula (except the Christian kingdom of Portugal) was finally united as Spain in 1492.

Probably the greatest and clearly the longest lasting signs of medieval economic development are the magnificent Cathedrals of Europe. The earliest is the Abbey Church of St Denis in France, built from 1135-44. By the 16th century all the biggest cities, the seats of Bishops, had one. The favourite style is called "Gothic", involving vertical lines, and ornate frills.

In Britain there are 26, from Canterbury in the South, to Durham in the North. Some examples are Westminster, Ely, Worcester, Lincoln and York. There were also very many Monasteries built in this period, some of comparable Gothic flamboyance. Many are still standing in Europe, but not in Britain.

Another great advance at this time was the development of Universities. The revival of the money economy was a factor, allowing students to be relatively independent and fund their studies. The first University was founded in Bologna, Italy, in 1088. Britain got its first very soon afterwards, in Oxford in 1096.

Eventually, European prosperity broke in what has become known as the crisis of the 14th century. It began with a missed summer and a terrible famine in 1316, followed by a long period of economic stagnation, overpopulation, plague and war.

The Norman Conquest of England

In the 9th and 10th centuries, both the Anglo-Saxons and the Franks had made concessions to the Vikings. First the Vikings had taken land and been paid to go away. Then they took more land, and the land and money turned into big, wealth-creating estates. The descendants of the Vikings, the Danes and the Normans, had become some of the richest and most powerful people in Northern Europe.

The Danish King Cnut ruled England from 1016. When he died in 1035, the Danes were preoccupied with his succession at home, giving the Anglo-Saxon Lords a chance to fight back

under Edward the Confessor. His name “Confessor” refers to the fact that he became very religious toward the end of his life. He'd started off like a typical King, trying to get his own way, but when the big landowners of England forced him to relent he took to a more-or-less monastic life.

Meanwhile, the Normans had established a territory in France. They became Duke's with allegiance to the King in Paris. They lost their Viking language and began to speak a form of French. When Edward the Confessor died without an heir, the next King would certainly be French-speaking, either Harold, from the richest family in England, but raised by his Norman mother in Normandy. Or, William, a true Norman, with no claim to the crown except a promise he claimed Harold had given him. William had the backing of the Pope and a host of European Knights.

It was a close run thing. What might have been decisive was the fact that Harold had to take his army north to fight off another Scandinavian invasion, and then return exhausted, to face William on the south coast. They met at the Battle of Hastings, on the most famous date in British history, 1066.

William won, and became forever known as William the Conqueror. There's some evidence that he just wanted to expand his property and tried not to interfere with how England was run. To win however, he needed to recruit Knights from all over Northern France. What was in it for them? Where they going to fight for him and then just go home?

European aristocracies needed conquest to live on. The more the Norman Lords took over estates, the more the English fought back, and it escalated out of control. The attempt of some Englishmen to crown a new Danish King in York, lead to something called “the harrying of the North”, which really meant that European Knights destroyed thousands of homes and villages, burning crops and causing mass starvation.

A kind of guerrilla war went on for decades afterwards. Gangs of Englishmen would attack and kill lone Normans who passed by. There is evidence of this in the prosecution of what was called The Law of Englishry, which said that if ever the body of a dead Norman was found, the nearest village had to pay a fine.

Something like 10-20,000 people, Norman aristocrats and European mercenaries replaced at least 90% of the English aristocracy. To make a show of their power, and probably also to give Norman Knights a place to hide if things turned ugly, they built impressive castles across the country. I think this is really why 1066 is such a famous date. The Normans were England's great builders. They gave the country its many castles.

In 1086, William commissioned a book accounting for everything in his new Kingdom. It became known as the Domesday Book. Its main purpose was to make sure that everyone paid their taxes and the King knew how much money he was going to get. It's because of it that we know that there were nearly 3 million people living in England. The population had finally recovered to what it was in the best of Roman times.

The Plantagenets

In 1135 William's son, King Henry, died without a surviving son. His daughter, Matilda, had married an extremely rich Frenchman and was living in France, as was his nephew Stephen. It was Stephen who first seized the initiative and came to England to claim the throne. Two years later Matilda landed with an army, starting 14 years of war that became known as “the anarchy”.

Eventually Matilda died, and when Stephen saw that her son Henry would fight on, he decided to

find a compromise. They agreed to allow Stephen to stay on as King with the young Henry as his heir. The very next year, Stephen died and England got a new dynasty, one that owned Anjou, one of the richest parts of France. This is why in Europe the new Royal family were known as the Angevins. In England they later became known as the Plantagenets.

King Henry II used some of his vast wealth to conquer Ireland. He reigned for a long time, 35 years. This is enough time to have several sons and create the problem of how to divide the estates up between them. Meanwhile, in the name of Christianity, Europe was gathering up its spare soldiers and sending off to the Middle East. The first Crusade was launched in 1095, and the third in 1188.

Henry's oldest surviving son Richard was very keen on Crusading. He was a heroic, chivalrous character, who earned the nickname Richard the Lionheart. Having sold most of his English land to the Barons to pay for his Crusades, he was captured by the King of France who demanded a ransom for his return. The Barons were forced to pay. Not long after he was released, Richard was killed on Crusade.

That left King John, Lord of Ireland, with very little wealth-creating land in England. Here we can see a problem with inherited Royal power evolving from leadership by the richest landowner. What happens when the balance changes and the King is no longer the richest in the land? In this case, John used his power as King to raise money, violently enforcing taxes, claiming other people's estates and making a lot of enemies. This is the period of English history when the legend of Robin Hood is set.

In medieval times, woods were protected by a complex system of feudal rights, for example, a peasant might have the right to graze his pigs in it for three months of the year. This created areas were an Outlaw, that is to say someone who had lost the protection of the law, could hide. The legend of Robin Hood is about a man who returns from Crusade to find his land taken over by King John. He lives as an Outlaw in Sherwood Forest, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor.

The earliest known reference to Robin Hood comes from 1½ centuries after the reign of King John, but suggests that it was already an old story. Medieval villages were known to hold "Robin Hood games", with processions and a collection for a common good. It is now generally believed that he is a "liminal" figure, that is to say, a character of this kind is not unlikely, although the standard story is almost certainly fictional.

The most historically important event of John's reign was a revolution, organised by about 200 wealthy barons. After some brief fighting in 1215, they forced him to accept a list of rights called Magna Carta. As soon as the rebels disbanded, he revoked it. John's successor, Henry III however, began as a popular King, accepting the Baron's rights when he was crowned in 1235. He borrowed money and built more palaces and castles.

Later in life, Henry decided he'd had enough on limitations of his power and revoked Magna Carta. He took on and successfully defeated the Barons in the war of the 1260s. When he died in 1272 he was succeeded by his son, who not only bought peace with the Barons by renewing the charter, he also allowed the establishment of Parliament to protect it. From then on, future Kings and Queens of England have signed Magna Carta on taking the crown.

King Edward was also a great borrower and builder. Having lost most of his family's lands in France, he decided to extend his realm on the islands. He subdued, but couldn't hold on to Scotland. After conquering Wales he encircled it with castles. He took away the local's power to choose their "Prince". From this point on, the King or Queen's eldest son, is called the Prince of Wales.

The crisis of the 14th century

Throughout the whole period we've been talking about so far, the population in Britain has been rising relatively steadily, and it appears to be a relatively prosperous time. The situation changed in the 14th century.

In 1316 there was an increase in rain, ruining crops and producing widespread malnutrition and episodes of starvation. Yet, for some reason the population continued to rise, so that by the middle of the century, there were too many people farming fields that could barely sustain them. Then in 1346 came the Black Death. This was Bubonic plague, that started somewhere in Central Asia, and spread across the Mongol trade routes.

In Britain it killed 40-60% of the population, reducing it from about 3½ million to less than 2 million. For the survivors among the small farmers and working population, what followed was relative prosperity. Landowners with a shortage of workers (producing wool for the European markets for example) were prepared to pay higher wages. Because serfdom had ended, workers were able to move to where wages were higher. To begin with, these workers were mostly small farmers who supplemented their income by occasional work ("journeymen"). Later, more of them would settle permanently in towns.

Competition forced up wages, until the wealthy Landlords put pressure of the King to act. In fact it was a Nobleman, John of Gaunt, acting as regent to the boy King Richard II, who took a decisive step. He introduced a Poll Tax, that is to say, a tax that falls equally on everyone, whether rich or poor. It provoked Britain's first ever people's revolution.

It is widely believed by historians that England's peasants at this time were freemen. Nevertheless, contemporary reports of the rebels of 1381, describe them as "serfs". Their demands were an end to the poll tax, the removal the King's corrupt officers and the abolition of serfdom. Although it occurred throughout England, it was strongest in the South East, and no attempt to build a national force is recorded. Instead, the rebellion culminated in a march on the city of London, intended to petition the boy King.

Although vacillating at first, young King Richard eventually proved ruthless. Around 1,500 rebels are believed to have been killed. In the decades that followed the King was reluctant to impose taxes to fund his wars in France, and his lucrative land there was gradually lost. Division opened up in the unpopular Royal Family.

When Parliament decided that King Henry VI was mad, in 1453, it appointed his infant son King, with his uncle Richard as regent and Lord Protector. Supporters of either side clashed at St Albans in 1455, marking the beginning of 30 years of conflict. One side was known as the "Yorkists", whose emblem was the White Rose of Yorkshire, and the other side was known as the "Lancastrians", whose emblem was the Red Rose of Lancashire. Much later this would become known as the "War of the Roses". Power alternated between them.

It all finally ended, when a powerful Welsh Baron, Edmund Tudor married into the House of Lancaster, handing on to his son, Henry Tudor, enough land and wealth to take the throne in 1485. As King Henry VII, he then married Elizabeth of York, further enriching his family and removing any challenges to his power. The new dynasty, the Tudors, could afford an extensive civil service, making it the most centralised so far in British history.

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