



Lanton Quarry School's Pack

Anglo Saxon Period Teachers' Information sheet

The Anglo-Saxon period spans from 550-1066 AD. In around 410 the Roman Emperor Honorius told local authorities in Britain that he could not send any more reinforcements to help them defend themselves against invaders. These invaders included the Angles, Saxons and Jutes from northern Germany and southern Denmark. By around 500 AD many of the invaders had settled in Britain. They brought with them their own belief system however the country was mostly converted to Christianity by 597. They replaced the Roman stone buildings with wooden ones and spoke their own language.

Settlement

Excavations at Lanton Quarry revealed evidence for a low status Anglo-Saxon village with houses, workshops and boundary fences. Seven small workshops, called *Grübenhauser*, were excavated, each one containing evidence of the craft that was practiced there. These workshops, however, were very small and would not have been used as living spaces. Four larger rectangular structures were also excavated at Lanton, however these did not produce anywhere near as many artefacts as the workshops did. It is believed that these structures would have been where people lived, ate and slept.

Diet and Subsistence

Most people during the Anglo-Saxon period survived on a diet of bread, beans, peas and root vegetables with occasional cheese, fish, fowls and, very rarely, red meat. Cattle were an important measure of wealth and only the upper classes regularly ate red meat. Pigs were eaten in great numbers by the poorer classes, often in the form of sausages and bacon. Domestic hens, ducks and geese were kept for eggs but were also eaten, as were wild birds. Domestic animals were much smaller than modern equivalents and breeds would have varied from place to place. Domestic animals seem to have been well looked after, with little evidence of malnutrition or health problems. Each family made their own coarse bread from flour and water which they often ate with soft cheese. After a particularly bad harvest bread had to be made with acorns instead of flour. At Lanton Quarry, cereal grains were found in one of the *Grübenhauser*. We know that the main cereal was barley but that wheat, rye and oats were also eaten. Fragments of a quern stone were found in another of the workshops, providing evidence that wheat was being ground for flour. Animal bones were also discovered at Lanton which indicate that animals were being butchered for their meat. Ale and mead were the favoured drinks during the Anglo-Saxon period while wine was only an occasional luxury.

Tools and Technology

The Anglo-Saxons were a very industrious people. They were warriors, farmers, seamen and craft specialists and they were very adept at working metal. They crafted high quality and extremely strong 'pattern welded' swords which gave the blade strength so as not to bend, break or chip easily. These were made by heating the iron for the sword and twisting it while hot then hammering

flat. This was repeated several times. Each time the metal bar was reheated and twisted this left a pattern in the resulting sword after the bar was hammered flat. The Anglo-Saxons were also keen makers and users of jewellery. They made beautiful glass beads and also cut it into tiny pieces and placed it inside very fine gold surrounds. Garnets were also encrusted with gold to make objects such as finger rings and coloured glass was sometimes melted and set into gold patternwork – this is called ‘enamelling’ and was a technique that even the Romans had not mastered. Glass was also used to make jars and drinking vessels as well as for use in windows. At Lanton glass working was implied by the presence of two coloured glass beads.

Pottery making was an important activity and pots were used for storing materials, liquids and food, as well as for use as cooking vessels, serving vessels and for eating from. They were skilled at timberwork. They felled trees and split the trunks to produce planks and had saws, chisels and adzes to shape wood with. They built their houses and ships from timber. The ships were constructed with overlapping planks that were nailed together and sealed with a mastic while the houses and huge timber halls were made by setting upright timbers in postholes and connecting these to further timbers which created a frame for the building and its roof supports. They carved out the joints so that the timbers could be carefully fitted together and pegged.

Monuments and Religion

When the Anglo-Saxons first arrived they were pagans who worshipped multiple gods. The earliest Anglo-Saxon burials in Northumberland have been found inserted into pre-existing burial monuments that dated back in origin to the end of the Neolithic period. This was the way the Anglo-Saxons sought to relate themselves with the earlier inhabitants of the region to show themselves as the rightful heirs to this land. Sometimes the bodies would be accompanied with what the individual would have possessed in life. For males this could typically include clothes as well as jewellery such as rings and belt buckles together with weapons such as swords, spears, knives and shields. Women were often accompanied by fine jewellery such as brooches, rings, beads and highly decorated bone combs. This would present them in their best clothes and accessories for their life in the next world. We know little of the pagan Anglo-Saxon religion but their main god was Woden, after which ‘Wednesday’ or ‘Woden’s Day’ is named. A possible pagan temple, in which a group of ox skulls was buried, was found close to the Lanton site at Yeavering. The presence of the ox skulls suggests that oxen may have been sacrificed as part of the rituals and those present may have feasted on the meat.

Around 627 AD King Edwin introduced Christianity to Northumberland and from then onwards the baptism of the Northumbrian people took place. At this time baptism was achieved by a person being fully submerged in a river while a priest gave them his blessing. In the writings of Bede, a monk based at Monkwearmouth on the south side of the River Tyne who wrote one of the first and most reliable histories, he tells how Bishop Paulinus spent 30 days baptising the newly converted Anglo-Saxons of Northumberland in the River Glen a mile or so beyond Lanton Quarry. As the site at Lanton dates to the 6th century AD it is possible that the people who lived there were some of the first pagans to be converted to Christianity and this must have had a big impact on the way people lived and conducted themselves. Most of the earliest churches were made from wood and these do not survive, but some were made in stone. In Northumberland there are several churches with Anglo-Saxon stonework surviving in their fabric. For example the crypt at Hexham Abbey is part of the original Anglo-Saxon church, as is the tower at Warden church. At Kirknewton, near to Lanton Quarry, there is an Anglo-Saxon stone carving showing the three wise men adoring the babe Jesus that can be seen inserted into the wall of the church near the altar. This carving has been made in the typical Anglo-Saxon style and implies that there was an earlier Saxon stone church here before the current church was built. This is also suggested by the place name ‘Kirknewton’ which means ‘church new town’ or ‘town of the new church’.