**BBC History:** [**http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/lang\_gallery\_03.shtml**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/lang_gallery_03.shtml)

**The Ages of English**

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* **The Anglo Saxon invasions 449AD**
* With the Roman Empire fast falling apart, the British provinces are cut loose sometime in the early 5th century. Despite more than 400 years in charge, the Romans don't leave much of their Latin language behind, beyond the occasional place name.

Unsurprisingly, barbarian invaders, such as the Picts and Scots, are already clamouring at the borders, and the beleaguered Britons turn to a variety of Germanic tribes for 'protection'. From 449AD, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes begin to arrive and aggressively set up home. Many native Britons take to their heels and retreat west to Cornwall, Wales and Cumbria.

Cornish, Welsh and Cumbric languages develop, but the Celtic culture of central, southern and north eastern England doesn't stand a chance in a land ruled by Anglo Saxons.

* **Language development**
* The Anglo Saxons have little time for the native Celtic language, preferring to use their own tongue and its runic script. Christian missionaries begin to arrive in 597AD, led by Augustine. They bring with them a huge Latin vocabulary, and produce large numbers of manuscripts, in the form of the Bible and other religious texts. In the process, the missionaries sow the first seeds of literacy.

There is no standard system of spelling, so scribes spell words the way they are sounded in their part of the country. As a result, we have evidence of Old English dialects.

Four major dialects emerge in England: Northumbrian in the north; Mercian in the midlands; West Saxon in the south and west; and Kentish in the south east. Most Old English documents are written in West Saxon, the dialect of the politically prestigious area of Wessex, where Alfred the Great would rule in the 9th century.

* **The Viking Raids Begin - 787AD**
* The Vikings begin raiding Britain in 787AD and continue periodically until the 11th century. In less than a hundred years, these ferocious Danes rule most of eastern England, and remain in power until the Anglo Saxons strike back under Alfred the Great in 878AD.

The Danes suddenly find themselves restricted to an area called the 'Danelaw' – roughly the areas north east of a diagonal line from Chester to London. But the Danes retaliate, and by 980AD, a series of fresh assaults brings the rest of England under the rule of a Danish king, Cnut (Canute), in 1016. Danish dominance lasts until 1042.

* **Language development**
* The language of the Danes exerts an immense and long lasting influence on Old English, especially in the north and east. More than 1,500 place names in England have Scandinavian origins, particularly in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire.

For example, the '-by' in names like Rugby and Grimsby means 'farm' or 'town; the '-thorpe' in Althorpe and Linthorpe means 'village'; and the '-thwaite' in Braithwaite and Langthwaite means 'isolated area'.

Many Scandinavian personal names come from this time, especially those ending in '-son'. And some very common words – 'both', 'same', 'get', 'give', 'take' - enter the language, as do regular English pronouns like 'they', 'them', 'their'. During this period, over 1,800 words of probable Scandinavian origin enter the language.