Athelstan - The First King of England



Society - Kings, Thegns, and Ceorls



Anglo-Saxon England was a hierarchical society. The King was God's chosen ruler, responsible for law, justice, and protection. Thegns were nobles or warrior-lords who held land in exchange for military service. They were the king's main supporters. Ceorls were free peasants, the backbone of society,

who owned or rented land and served in the fyrd (militia). Slaves (Thralls) made up the lowest class and could be bought and sold.

The legal system was based on custom, compensation, and oaths. Rather than incarceration, punishment often involved fines or physical penalties. The “wergild” system assigned a monetary value to each person’s life, depending on his social status

Marriage and Sexual Practices

Marriage in Athelstan’s time was both a legal and spiritual contract. Among the elite, it was often arranged for political or economic reasons. Dowries and bride-prices were negotiated in advance, and marriage required the consent of the bride’s family. Among common folk, practices were more variable.

Sex outside marriage was frowned upon by the Church but was not uncommon. Adultery could be punished harshly, especially for women. Virginity before marriage was prized, but enforcement depended on class, region, and community expectations. Clerical celibacy was encouraged but not universally observed.

What they ate

The Anglo-Saxon diet was heavily seasonal and regionally influenced. Most people subsisted on grains, vegetables, and occasional meat. Athelstan’s laws promoted fasting days and discouraged gluttony, in line with Christian teachings.

Common foods included:

- Grains: Barley, rye, oats, and wheat (for bread and porridge)
- Vegetables: Leeks, onions, cabbage, beans, peas, turnips
- Fruits: Apples, berries, plums
- Meat: Pork, beef, mutton—though often reserved for feast days
- Fish: Especially in religious communities, which avoided meat during fasting
- Dairy: Cheese, butter, and milk

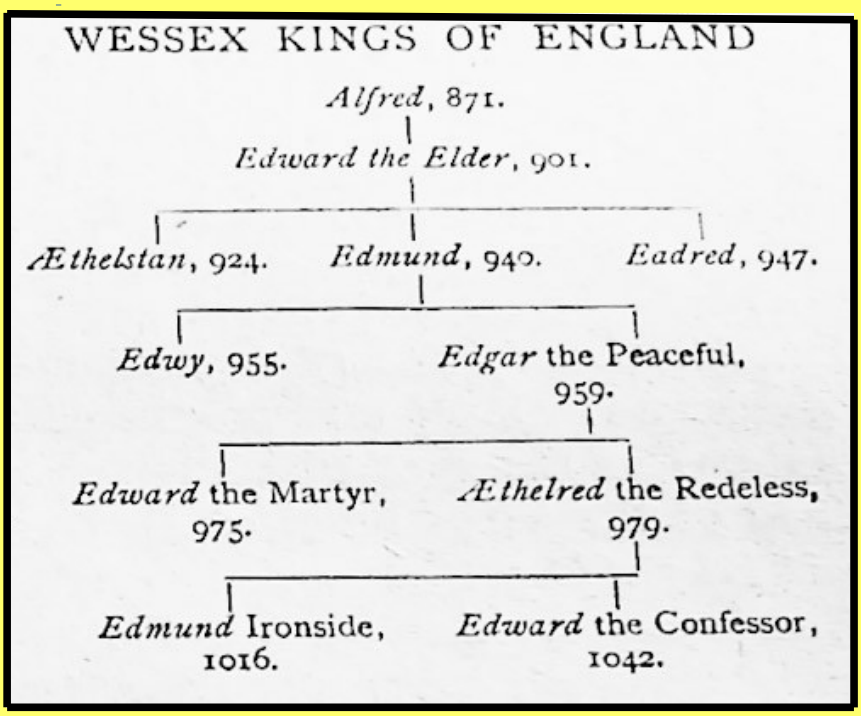
Spices and sweets were limited. Honey was the main sweetener. Exotic foods like potatoes, tomatoes, sugar, maize, chilli peppers, bananas, and citrus fruits were completely unknown, as they came from the Americas or southern Asia and were not introduced until centuries later.

Drinks included ale, mead, and occasionally wine (imported or from monastery vineyards). Water was often unsafe in urban areas. Ale was beer without the hops. Mead was fermented honey, sometimes stronger than wine, sometimes weaker.

The Legacy of Alfred the Great

To understand King Athelstan's life and significance, we begin with his grandfather, Alfred the Great, King of Wessex from 871 to 899. Alfred's reign was defined by resistance to Viking invasions, educational reform, and the seed of a vision: a united England. He never achieved full unification, but he did create a secure, literate, and Christian southern kingdom and established a dynasty that would carry on his work.

Alfred's son, Edward the Elder, inherited the throne of Wessex and extended control into Mercia and beyond. Edward was a capable leader, though perhaps not as celebrated as Alfred. He had multiple children from different marriages, leading to a complex succession situation—one that would play out with significance upon his death.



Athelstan, Edward's eldest son by his first wife (or possibly consort) Ecgwynn, was born around 894 or 895. The details of Ecgwynn's background are unclear—she may have been of noble Mercian stock, but some later chroniclers hint that she was not of sufficiently high status to be considered a

queen. This had implications for Athelstan's legitimacy among the Wessex elite. Despite this, Alfred is said to have taken a strong interest in Athelstan's upbringing. Some accounts describe Alfred presenting his grandson with a cloak, belt, and sword—a ceremonial gesture that symbolised his future kingship. Even if apocryphal, the story reflects the belief that Alfred saw something special in the boy.

A Mercian Education

Unlike most West Saxon princes, Athelstan was not raised solely in the royal court at Winchester. Instead, he spent much of his formative years in Mercia, with his aunt Æthelflæd, daughter of Alfred the Great and wife of Æthelred, Lord of the Mercians.

Æthelflæd was an extraordinary figure: after her husband's death, she ruled Mercia in her own right—a rarity for women in Anglo-Saxon England. Athelstan's time in Mercia exposed him to a different cultural environment, one more closely associated with the front lines of battle against the Norse, and deeply rooted in the traditions of the old Mercian kingship. This northern experience shaped Athelstan's political identity. He likely participated in military campaigns and gained an appreciation for both martial skill and regional loyalty. Importantly, the Mercians would later support his claim to kingship when Wessex wavered.

Edward the Elder's Death and the Succession Crisis

When Edward the Elder died in 924, he left behind multiple sons and a divided kingdom. The people of Wessex supported his younger son, Ælfweard, born of Edward's second marriage. Meanwhile, Mercia backed Athelstan. Ælfweard's death—just 16 days after his father—cleared the way for Athelstan, but tensions remained. Athelstan was crowned king in 925 at Kingston upon Thames, a site that would host many future coronations. The ceremony was significant: it included anointing by the church, oaths of loyalty, and public blessing—a fusion of Christian ritual and Germanic kingship.



The coronation was unusual for its time. Athelstan was the first king to be crowned wearing a crown instead of a helmet, and he insisted that the ceremony took place outdoors so that all could see him. He was sat upon a

special stone, now known as the Kings Stone, but which he selected from Stonehenge.



At first, Athelstan ruled only Wessex and Mercia. But events would soon elevate him far beyond even Alfred's achievements.

In 927, Athelstan captured York, the capital of the Norse kingdom of Jórvík in Northumbria. Its ruler, Olaf Sigtryggsson, fled to Ireland. This victory made Athelstan the first king to rule over all the Anglo-Saxon and Danish territories in what is now England.

He called a royal assembly at Eamont Bridge in Cumbria, where kings from Scotland, Strathclyde, and Wales acknowledged his overlordship. It was more symbolic than binding, but it marked Athelstan as "King of the English" and "King of All Britain." This was a turning point. For the first time, a single monarch could claim dominion from the Channel to the Tweed, and from the Welsh border to the North Sea.

Creating England

In 937, a grand alliance of his enemies—Constantine II of Scotland, Olaf Guthfrithson of Dublin, and Owain of Strathclyde—invaded England.



The goal was to break Athelstan's grip on the north. The armies clashed at Brunanburh in one of the bloodiest battles in British history. Athelstan, with his half-brother Edmund by his side, won a hard-fought victory. The battle was immortalised in a poem in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle:

"No greater slaughter of a host was there made before this, by the edge of the sword, since the Angles and Saxons came hither from the east…"



Brunanburh sealed Athelstan's reputation. It also preserved the unity of England, at least for a time. Athelstan inherited and refined the military traditions of Wessex. The army was built around the fyrd, a local militia of free men summoned for temporary service. Thegns and their retinues formed the core of the professional fighting force. The king could raise troops quickly via messengers on horseback. Each shire had obligations to provide men, and monasteries often funded armour or weapons as part of their duties. Tactics were straightforward: shield walls, cavalry (used sparingly), and archers (limited role). Battles were often decided by discipline and morale rather than manoeuvre. Athelstan also had a navy, which he used to patrol against Viking incursions and secure coastal towns.

After the conquest of York, he garrisoned key towns with loyal troops and relied on burhs (fortified towns) for defence. These burhs also served as economic and administrative hubs.

Diplomacy

Athelstan's court was arguably the most cosmopolitan in Europe. He arranged marriages for his sisters into the royal families of France (Capetian dynasty), Brittany and the Holy Roman Empire (Ottonian dynasty). He maintained friendly relations with the Pope and received envoys from distant lands. His kingdom was respected and feared, not just locally, but across Christendom. He also welcomed scholars, relics, and books from the continent. His reign saw a mini-renaissance in religious life, education, and manuscript production.

A Lawgiver King

Athelstan was a prolific lawmaker, and his legislation reveals much about the concerns of his reign—and the nature of Saxon society.



He issued a series of legal codes, some of which survive in remarkably complete form. His laws dealt with a range of subjects:

- Theft and Robbery: Athelstan was obsessed with property crime. He ordered harsh penalties for theft, including mutilation (such as amputation of hands) and execution for repeat or serious offenders.
- Coinage and Trade: He standardized weights and measures, tried to root out forgery, and enforced honest dealing in marketplaces.
- Justice and Courts: He ordered that each shire and hundred (local administrative units) should have a court that met regularly. Oaths and witness testimony were central to Anglo-Saxon justice, and Athelstan insisted on strong oversight.

  Church and Morality: Athelstan worked closely with the church to promote Christian values. He punished sexual misconduct (including adultery and incest), mandated Sabbath observance, and promoted charity.



Punishments under Athelstan were harsh by modern standards. In addition to physical penalties, public shaming, exile, and even capital punishment were common. The king also encouraged a form of community policing, with tithings (groups of ten men) expected to keep each other accountable.

Final Years and Death



Athelstan never married and had no heirs. He died in 939, possibly in Gloucester, at about 44 years of age. He chose to be buried at Malmesbury Abbey, not the traditional royal site of Winchester. The reason isn't entirely clear, but it reflects his personal devotion to the abbey and his possible desire to avoid the dynastic squabbles that had plagued his youth.



His tomb can still be seen today, though the original inscription is lost. It's empty of course and only dates from the 15th century. He's buried somewhere in the grounds

Historical Judgment

Athelstan was overshadowed for centuries by Alfred the Great, but modern historians increasingly recognise him as the true founder of the English nation.

He:

- Created a kingdom of England
- Standardised law and governance
- Defeated a massive foreign coalition
- Fostered ties with Europe
- Deepened the role of the Church in public life

William of Malmesbury, writing two centuries later, called him: “the most glorious of all kings who have ever governed the English nation." He may not be as well-known today, but without Athelstan, there might never have been an England at all.

King Athelstan’s coat of arms in Exeter Cathedral

