

Historians' meeting 29 March 2024

Anthony Poulton-Smith: 'The Saxon Era'

The Anglo-Saxons, according to the speaker Anthony Poulton-Smith, gave us the basis of our society that we know today.

After being a nation of many tribes, under Roman occupation by AD829 there were just four Kingdoms: Mercia, Northumbria, Wessex and East Anglia. England had its first King of all England in 929 with Aethelstan. The forerunner of our parliamentary system was Witan (an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'wise men'), where earls, nobles and churchmen decreed laws and rights. Our Imperial measurement system was based on practical units such as an inch being the length of a man's thumb from first knuckle to tip, a yard being the length of the new growth of a pollarded tree, a furlong the area an ox could plough before being rested and an acre the area an ox team could plough in one day.

Surprisingly, 97% of our everyday language is based on that spoken at the time of the Anglo-Saxons, which was an amalgamation of the various European languages of the population. Our words to describe the weather, our health and bodies, farming and food, animals, our countryside and homes are still recognisable today as Anglo-Saxon.