

Young Folks' History of England

by

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1. Julius C&Aelig;Sar, B.C. 55.....	4
2. The Romans In Britain, A.D. 41—418	6
3. The Angle Children, A.D. 597.....	8
4. The Northmen, A.D. 858—958	10
5. The Danish Conquest, A.D. 958—1035	12
6. The Norman Conquest, A.D. 1035—1066	14
7. William The Conqueror, A.D. 1066—1087	16
8. William II, Rufus, A.D. 1087-1100	18
9. Henry I, Beau-Clerc, A.D. 1100—1135	20
10. Stephen, A.D. 1135—1154.....	22
11. Henry II, Fitz-Empress, A.D. 1154-1189	24
12. Richard I, Lion-Heart, A.D. 1189—1199	26
13. John, Lackland, A.D. 1199—1216	29
14. Henry III, Of Winchester, A.D. 1216—1272	31
15. Edward I, Longshanks, A.D. 1272—1307.....	34
16. Edward II, Of Caernarvon, A.D. 1307—1327.....	37
17. Edward III, A.D. 1327—1377	39
18. Richard II, A.D. 1377—1399	42
19. Henry IV, A.D. 1399—1413.....	45
20. Henry V, Of Monmouth, A.D. 1413—1423.....	48
21. Henry VI, Of Windsor, A.D. 1423—1461.....	50
22. Edward IV, A.D. 1461—1483	53
23. Edward V, A.D. 1483	56
24. Richard III, A.D. 1483—1485	58
25. Henry VII, A.D. 1485—1509	60
26. Henry VIII And Cardinal Wolsey, A.D. 1509—1529.....	63
27. Henry VIII And His Wives, A.D. 1528—1547	65
28. Edward VI, A.D. 1547—1553	68
29. Mary I, A.D. 1553—1588.....	70
30. Elizabeth, A.D. 1558—1587.....	72
31. Elizabeth's Reign, A.D. 1587—1602.....	75
32. James I, A.D. 1602—1625.....	78
33. Charles I, A.D. 1625—1649	81
34. The Long Parliament, A.D. 1641—1649.....	83
35. Death Of Charles I, A.D. 1649—1651	85
36. Oliver Cromwell, A.D. 1649—1660.....	88
37. Charles II, A.D. 1660-1685.....	90
38. James II, A.D. 1685—1688	93
39. William III. And Mary II, 1689—1702	96

40. Anne, A.D. 1702—1714	99
41. George I, A.D. 1714—1725.....	102
42. George II, A.D. 1725—1760	104
43. George III, A.D. 1760—1785	106
44. George III, A.D. 1785—1810	108
45. George III.—The Regency, A.D. 1810—1820.....	111
46. George IV, A.D. 1820—1830.....	113
47. William IV, A.D. 1830—1837	115
48. Victoria, A.D. 1837—1855.....	117
49. Victoria, A.D. 1857—1860.....	119
50. Victoria, A.D. 1860—1872.....	121
Questions For Examination.....	123

1. Julius Cæsar, B.C. 55

Nearly two thousand years ago there was a brave captain whose name was Julius Cæsar. The soldiers he led to battle were very strong, and conquered the people wherever they went. They had no gun or gunpowder then; but they had swords and spears, and, to prevent themselves from being hurt, they had helmets or brazen caps on their heads, with long tufts of horse-hair upon them, by way of ornament, and breast-plates of brass on their breasts, and on their arms they carried a sort of screen, made of strong leather. One of them carried a little brass figure of an eagle on a long pole, with a scarlet flag flying below, and wherever the eagle was seen, they all followed, and fought so bravely that nothing could long stand against them.

When Julius Cæsar rode at their head, with his keen, pale hook-nosed face, and the scarlet cloak that the general always wore, they were so proud of him, and so fond of him, that there was nothing they would not do for him.

Julius Cæsar heard that a little way off there was a country nobody knew anything about, except that the people were very fierce and savage, and that a sort of pearl was found in the shells of mussels which lived in the rivers. He could not bear that there should be any place that his own people, the Romans, did not know and subdue. So he commanded the ships to be prepared, and he and his soldiers embarked, watching the white cliffs on the other side of the sea grow higher and higher as he came nearer and nearer.

When he came quite up to them, he found the savages were there in earnest. They were tall men, with long red streaming hair, and such clothes as they had were woollen, checked like plaid; but many had their arms and breasts naked, and painted all over in blue patterns. They yelled and brandished their darts, to make Julius Cæsar and his Roman soldiers keep away; but he only went on to a place where the shore was not quite so steep, and there commanded his soldiers to land. The savages had run along the shore too, and there was a terrible fight; but at last the man who carried the eagle jumped down into the middle of the natives, calling out to his fellows that they must come after him, or they would lose their eagle. They all came rushing and leaping down, and thus they managed to force back the savages, and make their way to the shore.

There was not much worth having when they had made their way there. Though they came again the next year, and forced their way a good deal farther into the country, they saw chiefly bare downs, or heaths, or thick woods. The few houses were little more than piles of stones, and the people were rough and wild, and could do very little. The men hunted wild boars, and wolves and stags, and the women dug the ground, and raised a little corn, which they ground to flour between two stones to make bread; and they spun the wool of their sheep, dyed it with bright colors, and wove it into

dresses. They had some strong places in the woods, with trunks of trees, cut down to shut them in from the enemy, with all their flocks and cattle; but Cæsar did not get into any of these. He only made the natives give him some of their pearls, and call the Romans their masters, and then he went back to his ships, and none of the set of savages who were alive when he came saw him or his Romans any more.

Do you know who these savages were who fought with Julius Cæsar? They were called Britons. And the country he came to see? That was our very own island, England, only it was not called so then. And the place where Julius Cæsar landed is called Deal, and, if you look at the map where England and France most nearly touch one another, I think you will see the name Deal, and remember it was there Julius Cæsar landed, and fought with the Britons.

It was fifty-five years before our blessed Saviour was born that the Romans came. So at the top of this chapter stands B.C. (Before Christ) 55.

2. The Romans In Britain, A.D. 41—418

It was nearly a hundred years before any more of the Romans came to Britain; but they were people who could not hear of a place without wanting to conquer it, and they never left off trying till they had done what they undertook.

One of their emperors, named Claudius, sent his soldiers to conquer the island, and then came to see it himself, and called himself Britannicus in honor of the victory, just as if he had done it himself, instead of his generals. One British chief, whose name was Caractacus, who had fought very bravely against the Romans, was brought to Rome, with chains on his hands and feet, and set before them emperor. As he stood there, he said that, when he looked at all the grand buildings of stone and marble in the streets, he could not think why the Romans should want to take away the poor rough-stone huts of the Britons. The wife of Caractacus, who had also been brought a prisoner to Rome, fell upon her knees imploring for pity, but the conquered chief asked for nothing and exhibited no signs of fear. Claudius was kind to Caractacus; but the Romans went on conquering Britain till they had won all the part of it that lies south of the river Tweed; and, as the people beyond that point were more fierce and savage still, a very strong wall, with a bank of earth and deep ditch was made to keep them out, and always watched by Roman soldiers.

The Romans made beautiful straight roads all over the country, and they built towns. Almost all the towns whose names end in *chester* were begun by the Romans, and bits of their walls are to be seen still, built of very small bricks. Sometimes people dig up a bit of the beautiful pavement of colored tiles, in patterns, which used to be the floors of their houses, or a piece of their money, or one of their ornaments.

For the Romans held Britain for four hundred years, and tamed the wild people in the south, and taught them to speak and dress, and read and write like themselves, so that they could hardly be known from the Romans. Only the wild ones beyond the wall, and in the mountains, were as savage as ever, and, now and then, used to come and steal the cattle, and burn the houses of their neighbors who had learnt better.

Another set of wild people used to come over in boats across the North Sea and German Ocean. These people had their home in the country that is called Holstein and Jutland. They were tall men, and had blue eyes and fair hair, and they were very strong, and good-natured in a rough sort of way, though they were fierce to their enemies. There was a great deal more fighting than any one has told us about; but the end of it all was that the Roman soldiers were wanted at home, and though the great British chief we call King Arthur fought very bravely, he could not drive back the blue-eyed men in the ships;

but more and more came, till, at last, they got all the country, and drove the Britons, some up into the North, some into the mountains that rise along the West of the island, and some into its west point.

The Britons used to call the blue-eyed men Saxons; but they called themselves Angles, and the country was called after them Angle-land. Don't you know what it is called now? England itself, and the people English. They spoke much the same language as we do, only more as untaught country people, and they had not so many words, because they had not so many things to see and talk about.

As to the Britons, the English went on driving them back till they only kept their mountains. There they have gone on living ever since, and talking their own old language. The English called them Welsh, a name that meant strangers, and we call them Welsh still, and their country Wales. They made a great many grand stories about their last brave chief, Arthur, till, at last, they turned into a sort of fairy tale. It was said that, when King Arthur lay badly wounded after his last battle, he bade his friend fling his sword into the river, and that then three lovely ladies came in a boat, and carried him away to a secret island. The Welsh kept on saying, for years and years, that one day king Arthur would wake up again, and give them back all Britain, which used to be their own before the English got it for themselves; but the English have had England now for thirteen hundred years, and we cannot doubt they will keep it as long as the world lasts.

It was about 400 years after our Lord was born that the Romans were going and the English coming.

3. The Angle Children, A.D. 597

The old English who had come to Britain were heathen, and believed in many false gods: the Sun, to whom they made Sunday sacred, as Monday was to the moon, Wednesday to a great terrible god, named Woden, and Thursday to a god named Thor, or Thunder. They thought a clap of thunder was the sound of the great hammer he carried in his hand. They thought their gods cared for people being brave, and that the souls of those who died fighting gallantly in battle were the happiest of all; but they did not care for kindness or gentleness.

Thus they often did very cruel things, and one of the worst that they did was the stealing of men, women, and children from their homes, and selling them to strangers, who made slaves of them. All England had not one king. There were generally about seven kings, each with a different part of the island and as they were often at war with one another, they used to steal one another's subjects, and sell them to merchants who came from Italy and Greece for them.

Some English children were made slaves, and carried to Rome, where they were set in the market-place to be sold. A good priest, named Gregory, was walking by. He saw their fair faces, blue eyes, and long light hair, and, stopping, he asked who they were. "Angles," he was told, "from the isle of Britain." "Angles?" he said, "they have angel faces, and they ought to be heirs with the angels in heaven." From that time this good man tried to find means to send teachers to teach the English the Christian faith. He had to wait for many years, and, in that time, he was made Pope, namely, Father-Bishop of Rome. At last he heard that one of the chief English kings, Ethelbert of Kent, had married Bertha, the daughter of the King of Paris, who was a Christian, and that she was to be allowed to bring a priest with her, and have a church to worship in.

Gregory thought this would make a beginning: so he sent a priest, whose name was Augustine, with a letter to King Ethelbert and Queen Bertha, and asked the King to listen to him. Ethelbert met Augustine in the open air, under a tree at Canterbury, and heard him tell about the true God, and JESUS CHRIST, whom He sent; and, after some time, and a great deal of teaching, Ethelbert gave up worshiping Woden and Thor, and believed in the true God, and was baptized, and many of his people with him. Then Augustine was made Archbishop of Canterbury; and, one after another, in the course of the next hundred years, all the English kingdoms learnt to know God, and broke down their idols, and became Christian.

Bishops were appointed, and churches were built, and parishes were marked off—a great many of them the very same that we have now. Here and there, when men and women wanted to be very good indeed, and to give their

whole lives to doing nothing but serving God, without any of the fighting and feasting, the buying and selling of the outer world, they built houses, where they might live apart, and churches, where there might be services seven times a day. These houses were named abbeys. Those for men were, sometimes, also called monasteries, and the men in them were termed monks, while the women were called nuns, and their homes convents of nunneries. They had plain dark dresses, and hoods, and the women always had veils. The monks used to promise that they would work as well as pray, so they used to build their abbeys by some forest or marsh, and bring it all into order, turning the wild place into fields, full of wheat. Others used to copy out the Holy Scriptures and other good books upon parchment—because there was no paper in those days, nor any printing—drawing beautiful painted pictures at the beginning of the chapters, which were called illuminations. The nun did needlework and embroidery, as hangings for the altar, and garments for the priests, all bright with beautiful colors, and stiff with gold. The English nuns' work was the most beautiful to be seen anywhere.

There were schools in the abbeys, where boys were taught reading, writing, singing, and Latin, to prepare them for being clergymen; but not many others thought it needful to have anything to do with books. Even the great men thought they could farm and feast, advise the king, and consent to the laws, hunt or fight, quite as well without reading, and they did not care for much besides; for, though they were Christians, they were still rude, rough, ignorant men, who liked nothing so well as a hunt or a feast, and slept away all the evening, especially when they could get a harper to sing to them.

The English men used to wear a long dress like a carter's frock, and their legs were wound round with strips of cloth by way of stockings. Their houses were only one story, and had no chimneys—only a hole at the top for the smoke to go out at; and no glass in the windows. The only glass there was at all had been brought from Italy to put into York Cathedral, and it was thought a great wonder. So the windows had shutters to keep out the rain and wind, and the fire was in the middle of the room. At dinner-time, about twelve o'clock, the lord and lady of the house sat upon cross-legged stools, and their children and servants sat on benches; and square bits of wood called trenchers, were put before them for plates, while the servants carried round the meat on spits, and everybody cut off a piece with his own knife and ate it without a fork. They drank out of cows' horns, if they had not silver cups. But though they were so rough they were often good, brave people.

4. The Northmen, A.D. 858—958

There were many more of the light-haired, blue-eyed people on the further side of the North Sea who worshiped Thor and Woden still, and thought that their kindred in England had fallen from the old ways. Besides, they liked to make their fortunes by getting what they could from their neighbors. Nobody was thought brave or worthy, in Norway or Denmark, who had not made some voyages in a "long keel," as a ship was called, and fought bravely, and brought home gold cups and chains or jewels to show where he had been. Their captains were called Sea Kings, and some of them went a great way, even into the Mediterranean Sea, and robbed the beautiful shores of Italy. So dreadful was it to see the fleet of long ships coming up to the shore, with a serpent for the figure-head, and a raven as the flag, and crowds of fierce warriors with axes in their hands longing for prey and bloodshed, that where we pray in church that God would deliver us from lightning and tempest, and battle and murder, our forefathers used to add, "From the fury of the Northmen, good Lord deliver us."

To England these Northmen came in great swarms, and chiefly from Denmark, so that they were generally called "the Danes." They burnt the houses, drove off the cows and sheep, killed the men, and took away the women and children to be slaves; and they were always most cruel of all where they found an Abbey with any monks or nuns, because they hated the Christian faith. By this time those seven English kingdoms I told you of had all fallen into the hands of one king. Egbert, King of the West Saxons, who reigned at Winchester, is counted as the first king of all England. His four grandsons had dreadful battles with the Danes all their lives, and the three eldest all died quite young. The youngest was the greatest and best king England ever had—Alfred the Truth-teller. As a child Alfred excited the hopes and admiration of all who saw him, and while his brothers were busy with their sports, it was his delight to kneel at his mother's knee, and recite to her the Saxon ballads which his tutor had read to him, inspiring him, at that early age, with the ardent patriotism and the passionate love of literature which rendered his character so illustrious. He was only twenty-two years old when he came to the throne, and the kingdom was overrun everywhere with the Danes. In the northern part some had even settled down and made themselves at home, as the English had done four hundred years before, and more and more kept coming in their ships: so that, though Alfred beat them in battle again and again, there was no such thing as driving them away. At last he had so very few faithful men left him, that he thought it wise to send them away, and hide himself in the Somersetshire marsh country. There is a pretty story told of him that he was hidden in the hut of a poor herdsman, whose wife, thinking he was a poor wandering soldier as he sat by the fire mending his bow and arrows, desired him to turn the cakes she had set to bake upon the hearth. Presently she found them burning, and cried out

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