

HODDER **GCSE HISTORY FOR EDEXCEL**



ANGLO-SAXON AND NORMAN ENGLAND

c.1060–88

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 **DYNAMIC**
LEARNING

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2 Anglo-Saxon society

What pictures do you have in your mind about Anglo-Saxon England? You may have seen the beautiful jewellery discovered at Sutton Hoo. This treasure suggests the Anglo-Saxons had very sophisticated skills. You might have been to the rebuilt Anglo-Saxon village at West Stow, where the homes may look simple and primitive.

‘Sophisticated’ and ‘primitive’ are good descriptive words but they are generalisations – words that make very general statements about a period or people. In this chapter you will look at Anglo-Saxon society more closely and decide how best to describe a variety of aspects of English life. These aspects cannot have been both ‘sophisticated’ and ‘primitive’. So what are the best words to describe each aspect of society in the chart below?



DESCRIBING ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

- 1 Draw a copy of the table below. Allow plenty of space to add words and phrases in the topic boxes.
- 2 Choose two or three words from the Word Wall below to describe each topic and pencil them into your table. Use pencil because you may wish to change them later. Don't be tempted to look ahead in the chapter yet; we want you to base your answers on what you think you know now.
- 3 Read pages 12–20. After reading about each topic, decide if you want to change any of your original words and make a final choice of five words for each topic.
- 4 Choose evidence to support your choice of words. For example, if you chose ‘small’ to describe villages, what evidence from pages 16–17 shows this word is accurate?

| Social system | | Monarchy and central government | | Local government and the eals | | Legal system | |
|---------------|----------|---------------------------------|----------|-------------------------------|----------|--------------|----------|
| Description | Evidence | Description | Evidence | Description | Evidence | Description | Evidence |
| | | | | | | | |

| Village life | | Town life | | The economy | | The Church | |
|--------------|----------|-------------|----------|-------------|----------|-------------|----------|
| Description | Evidence | Description | Evidence | Description | Evidence | Description | Evidence |
| | | | | | | | |

backward
 superstitious
 agricultural
 lawless
 well-organised
 complex

primitive
 poverty-stricken
 ignorant
 simple
 crude
 violent

low-technology
 efficient
 disorganised
 small
 large
 advanced

sophisticated
 centralised
 hard
 religious
 hierarchical
 war-like
 wealthy

diverse
 powerful
 localised
 listened to advice
 delegated
 law-abiding

2.1 The social system

Anglo-Saxon society was hierarchical, which means it was arranged in a clear order of rank or status. Everyone knew their status, and what was expected of them. This page sets out the social ranks, the work people in each rank did, and their responsibilities.

A person's status could increase if they paid for it. A slave could save up and buy his freedom to become a peasant. A ceorl could become a thane if he built up a large estate. People could move down in status if they committed a crime. Anglo-Saxon law ruled that some crimes were punishable by being made a slave.



▲ The **king's** most important tasks were to defend his country from attack, to pass good laws and to make sure the laws were obeyed. He also had power over the Church.



▲ The **earls** were the most powerful lords and owned huge areas of land. There were usually no more than six earls. They were the king's advisers, ensured the king's laws were enforced in their regions, and raised men for the king's army. They were expected to protect people on their lands from attack.



▲ **Thegns** (less than one per cent of the population) were nobles, but less powerful than earls. They were primarily warriors who defended the king. In return he granted them land. They carried out local duties such as guarding tax collectors from attack and organising the repair of fortifications, roads and bridges.



▲ **Ceorls** (roughly ten per cent of the population), sometimes called freemen, owned their own small area of farmland. Being free meant they did not have to work for their lord every week, unlike the peasants and slaves. All male ceorls had to serve in an army if needed.



▲ **Peasants** (over 70 per cent of the population) had to work on the lands of their lord for up to three days a week and do any job he requested, such as taking animals to market. On other days they farmed their own rented land to grow enough food to survive and pay their rent (which could be paid in money or goods, like pigs, eggs or milk). Every male peasant could be asked by their lord to fight in wartime.



◀ **Slaves** (around ten per cent of the population) were not free and had no land. They worked on their lord's land or in his house as servants. Their master dictated every aspect of their life, including the amount they worked, the food they ate, and sometimes even who they should marry.

Discuss if the words you chose from the Word Wall to describe the Anglo-Saxon social system on page 11 are correct or if you need to change them.

2.2 Monarchy and central government

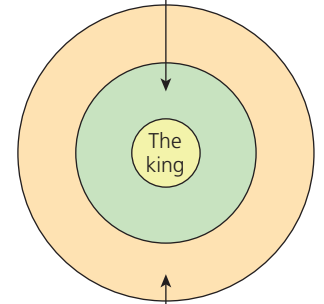
The king was the head of the government and took all the important decisions. His most important tasks were to:

- defend his country and his people from attack, usually by commanding the army himself; military skills were therefore important, although not essential
- pass good laws and to make sure the laws were obeyed
- defend the Church and appoint its leaders
- manage his earls and other nobles so they co-operated with his decisions and helped him run the country effectively. The king was the only person with the power to settle disputes between the nobles. The best kings used a combination of two things to manage their nobles – they rewarded nobles with land and wealth and dominated them with their strong personalities.

Today there is a large civil service to do all the administration governments need. In the eleventh century, kings had only a small number of administrators. The administrators wrote down the king's laws and sent out written orders called writs to officials around the country.

The groups of people helping the king were known as the royal household and the royal court. The diagram explains who these groups were. The household and court were not physical buildings but groups of people who moved around the country with the king.

The king's household consisted of the king, his family and his household soldiers, called housecarls, plus the servants needed to care for the royal family.




The court consisted of the king's household plus his advisers – the chief landowners and bishops who the king consulted on important decisions.

The Witan

When kings needed advice on important issues they called a meeting known as the Witanagemot, or **Witan** – an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'meeting of wise men'. The Witan did not have regular meetings or a regular membership. It met whenever the king decided to hold a meeting and only those he summoned could attend. The men summoned included earls, thanes and senior members of the Church, including archbishops and bishops. Even then the king took the final decisions. However, by consulting the most powerful men in the country, he had shown that he respected their views and they were more likely to support his decisions.

The Witan's most powerful role came if there was doubt about who would be the next king. Then the Witan could meet and make a recommendation or decision, but in most cases the real decision was made by whoever had the most military support. We will return in more detail to the question of how the crown was inherited on page 28.

Discuss if the words you chose from the Word Wall to describe monarchy and central government on page 11 are correct, or if they need changing. 



◀ An eleventh-century illustration of an Anglo-Saxon Witan. The king sits in the middle, wearing his crown and holding a sceptre and sword to symbolise his authority. In the background a man is being hanged to symbolise the power of the king over the lives of his people and his responsibility to ensure laws were kept.

2.3 Local government and the earls



▲ The major Anglo-Saxon earldoms in 1065.

The king was the centre of government, so he and his administrators are known as ‘central government’. However, the king could not govern every part of the country directly from the centre. He needed other people to govern each local area, making sure criminals were punished and taxes were collected. This work and the officials who did it are described as local government.

The very top layer of local government consisted of the earls, the most powerful landowners. The four main earldoms were Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria and East Anglia (see map). In these vast areas the earl was expected to ensure that there were no rebellions and that crimes were punished and armies were raised for the king. Earls were therefore second only in power to the king and could rival the king if they banded together.

However, earls owned such large areas that they were not able to collect every tax or punish every crime in their lands. Therefore, kings had created a more detailed system of local government that was very effective – the shires and the hundreds.

The shires and the hundreds

There were about 40 shires or counties. The king appointed a local thegn as sheriff (shire-reeve) – his chief official in each shire. The king sent him instructions in documents called ‘writs’. Sheriffs were expected to:

- collect taxes and fines due to the king
- carry out justice in the king’s shire-court; shire-courts dealt with the most serious crimes – murder, theft and disputes over the ownership of land
- raise soldiers for the royal army whenever they were needed.

The hundreds (called wapentakes in the north) were sub-divisions of shires. Hundreds each contained around twelve villages. Each hundred had its own **reeve** who held a hundred-court each month to deal with less serious crimes.

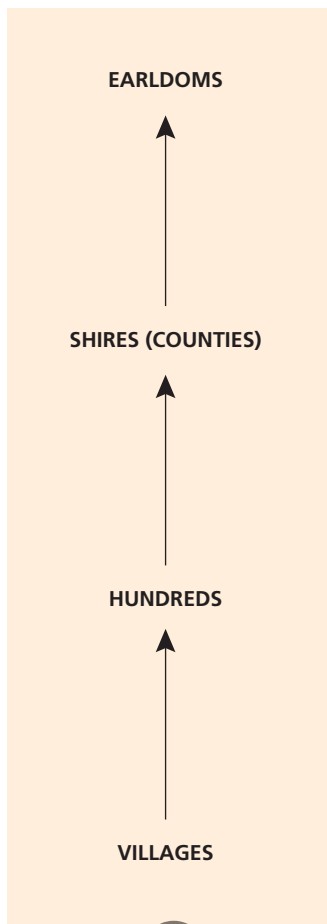
2.4 The legal system

The shire- and hundred-courts were the heart of the legal system, along with the king’s laws. These laws were very detailed, although kings had to accept that there were different legal customs around the country. In parts of Northumbria, for example, men still took part in the blood-feud. If a relative was killed or injured, family members believed they had the right to take their own revenge, often through violence, rather than taking the criminal to court for punishment. Blood-feuds, however, often led to more violence, so kings preferred other punishments which reduced the chance of further violence and crime.

Punishments

1 **Wergild** – this was a fine paid to the victims of crime or their families as compensation. The level of fine was laid down in the king’s laws and is a reminder of the hierarchy of Anglo-Saxon England. The wergild for killing a nobleman was 300 shillings, for killing a freeman was 100 shillings and for killing a peasant was even lower.

There were also fines for injuring different body parts. The wergild for a disabled shoulder was 30 shillings, a severed thumb 20 shillings and a lost big toe 10 shillings. This was probably because most Anglo-Saxon men were farmers or craftsmen so thumbs and shoulders were important. Without them a man’s ability to farm his land and earn money for his family was far less.



2 Capital punishment and physical punishment – a small number of serious crimes carried the death penalty, such as **treason** against the king or betraying your lord. This was to deter others and show the importance of loyalty to the king. As the Church was exceptionally important, anyone who stole from churches paid a fine and suffered the extra punishment of having a hand cut off.

Reoffenders were also punished harshly. Punishment for repeat offenders included mutilation, such as cutting off a hand, ear or nose or ‘putting out’ the eyes. Prisons were rarely used because they were expensive to build and run as gaolers would have to be paid and prisoners fed. Therefore, prisons were only used for holding criminals before trial so they could not escape.

Policing

Anglo-Saxon England did not have police forces. People lived in small communities so they could keep an eye on each other’s behaviour. Therefore Anglo-Saxon kings created a self-help system known as a tithing. Every male over the age of twelve joined a tithing, a group of ten men who were responsible for each other’s behaviour. If one broke the law, the other members of the tithing had to bring him to court, or pay a fine. This meant there was collective responsibility for stopping crime.

If a crime was committed the victim or witness was expected to raise the ‘**hue and cry**’. The entire village was expected to down tools and join the hunt to catch the criminal. If a person did not join the ‘hue and cry’ then the whole village would pay a hefty fine.

Trials

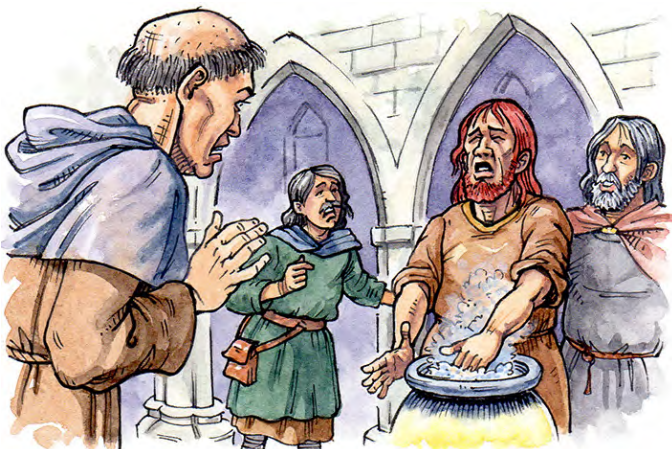
The Anglo-Saxons used two types of trial:

- 1 Trial by jury in the hundred- or shire-court. The jury consisted of men who knew both the accuser and the accused. The accuser and accused gave their version of events and it was up to the jury to decide who was telling the truth. If there was no clear evidence the jury made their decision based on their knowledge of the people concerned.
- 2 When the jury of a hundred- or shire-court could not decide on a person’s guilt, the accused was subjected to trial by ordeal in a church. This shows the importance of religion, because it was God who became the judge in trials by ordeal. Before the ordeal the accused had to fast for three days and hear Mass. There were different kinds of ordeal. Trial by hot water, for example, involved the accused plunging his hand into boiling water to pick up an object and lift it out. If the resulting wound healed cleanly, it was a sign from God that the accused was innocent. If it did not heal, they were guilty and should be punished.



▲ The members of a tithing were of all ages.

Discuss if the words you chose from the Word Wall to describe the Anglo-Saxon government and legal system on page 11 are correct or if they need changing.



◀ Trial by hot water to prove whether this man was innocent or guilty.

2.5 Village life

An earl's personal estate included a large wooden hall for entertaining and feasting. Inside was a bare earth floor, but the walls were decorated with tapestries and the earl's gold and valuable items would be on display. Some had their own private chamber for sleeping.

The church was one of the most important buildings in the village. Many churches were built of wood, although by the eleventh century some were being rebuilt in stone.

Ploughs were among the most valuable items in a village as they were essential for making the fields ready to grow crops. A team of eight oxen was used to pull a plough.

Not all villages had an earl's personal estate within them. Those villages far from an earl's estate would be subject to visits and checks from the earl or his men.

There were many millions of sheep, which were used for their wool, meat and milk. Pigs, cows, chickens and geese were also reared, which required plenty of land for pasture (fields for feeding animals).

A house was one large room with a fire in the centre (so the smoke could escape from a small hole in the roof) and different zones for cooking, sleeping and sitting. Animals would be brought in when the weather was particularly bad because peasants and ceorls relied on them for work and food and didn't want to run the risk of them dying in the cold.



Discuss if the words you chose from the Word Wall to describe Anglo-Saxon villages on page 11 are correct, or if you need to change them.

This picture is called an 'artist's reconstruction'. This means the artist has used evidence from Anglo-Saxon England to reconstruct what a village probably looked like. Most of the evidence from this period is archaeological evidence. If you search the internet for 'Anglo-Saxon archaeological sites' you can investigate the evidence for yourself.

In the 1060s there were approximately 2 million people in England. Ninety per cent of them lived in villages making a living from farming.

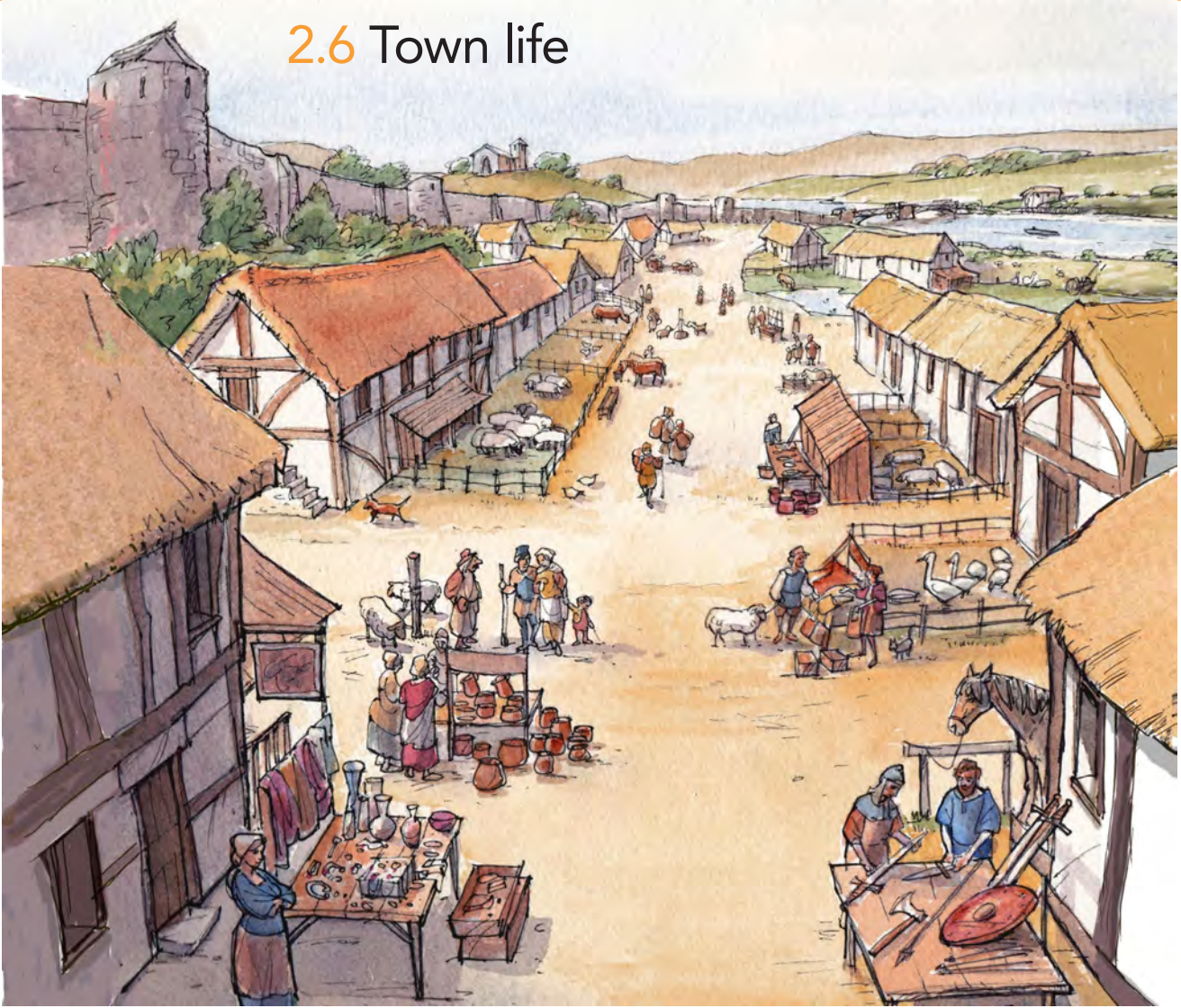
Rivers teemed with fish. Landlords who owned land near rivers sometimes received eels in rent (eels were a medieval delicacy!). The sea was equally full of life, with tens of thousands of herrings paid in rent to landlords who owned land on the coast.

The earl had storehouses, guest houses, workshops, stables, servants' houses, a bake-house or kitchen, a stone-built chapel, enclosures for animals and a training area for his soldiers.

Many villages contained just twelve or fifteen houses, owned by ceorls and peasants.

Houses were made of wattle and daub. Wattle could be sticks, twigs, or reeds from ponds. Daub was wet soil, clay, sand, animal dung and straw mixed to make a kind of cement to hold the wattle together. These materials did make homes waterproof but they also needed frequent repair.

2.6 Town life



Ten per cent of people in Anglo-Saxon England lived in towns. A town was a place that had a defensive wall, a mint (where coins were made) and a marketplace. Some were located on the sites where Roman towns had been and they incorporated Roman features such as the stone fortification walls.

In many ways, as you can see above, towns looked very like villages. Houses were built from the same materials as houses in a village – wattle and daub. They were usually built on narrow plots, often near to a river for water supplies. However, many people living in towns had higher status and more money than people in the countryside, even if their houses were much the same.

Another similarity with villages was that there were animals inside towns and grazing in fields outside the walls. Crops were also grown in fields outside the town by townspeople. This farming provided food for the townspeople and they could also sell their produce on market day.

By 1060 around a hundred places were described as towns, but compared with today Anglo-Saxon towns were extremely small. London (called Ludenwic) was the largest, with around 10,000 people. It was a great trading town but was not the capital city. The next largest group of towns had up to 5,000 people. They included York (Eoforwic), Southampton (Hamwic) and Winchester. Winchester was more like the capital city as it was the place where most of the king's treasure and important documents (such as laws) were kept.

The markets in towns sold a wide range of goods that were not made in villages. These included jewellery, leather items such as bags, woven cloth and weapons. Some traders also sold luxury goods like wine from France, pepper from Asia or the East Indies, fine cloth (like silk), spices and gems from Spain, Italy and the Middle East.

Discuss if the words you chose from the Word Wall to describe Anglo-Saxon towns on page 11 are correct, or if you need to change them. ?

2.7 The economy

The village economy

Villages had an agricultural economy. Peasants and ceorls were chiefly farmers, using their plots of land to grow crops of wheat, barley and vegetables, and to raise animals. However, many developed craft-skills and made goods such as pottery, iron weapons, tools and woven cloth. They produced just enough food and clothing, pots and other goods for their own family – this is called a subsistence economy.

Some people produced a little extra to barter (or swap for other things). This is called an exchange economy. Many more goods were sold by bartering than in exchange for coins. A peasant could barter milk, for example, in return for pottery bowls. He could also take his produce to the weekly market in a local town to sell in exchange for money, which he might then save to buy a new animal.

The urban economy

In towns the economy was predominantly an exchange economy. Towns held weekly markets where people would bring goods to sell. Craftspeople could sell their goods alongside traders who visited the town for the market day. Some of the craftspeople came from nearby villages, but a town such as York contained specialist leather workers, silversmiths and textile workers, and many had shops and workrooms in the town.

Towns on the coast or on large rivers were important ports for international trading routes. England **exported** its wool, iron and cheese; we even have records of slaves being traded to Ireland from Bristol. England **imported** precious metals, glass, wine, gems and spices which were then sold at markets.

Although a lot of goods were exchanged by barter on market day, Anglo-Saxons also bought and sold using coins. All coins were silver pennies and most of the silver for the coins came from Germany, which highlights the links Anglo-Saxon England had with other countries. Once the silver was imported, the law said that coins could only be made in towns (in the mint) so production had to be overseen by a royal official.

The economy

How people earned their living (e.g. what kinds of farming and trading took place) and how wealthy the country was.



▲ A silver penny from Harold's reign, showing the king's face. Historians estimate that 9 million silver coins were in use in 1066. Pennies were valuable coins. A sheep cost 5 silver pennies, a pig 10 silver pennies and an ox cost 30 silver pennies. Although peasants did use coins to make larger purchases from the market, such as an animal, it was the earls and wealthy members of society who depended on coins to buy, for example, military equipment or the luxury goods that showed their status.

- 1 What is the meaning of these words and phrases?
 - a) subsistence economy
 - b) barter
 - c) market
 - d) mint
 - e) exchange economy
- 2 Discuss if the words you chose from the Word Wall to describe the Anglo-Saxon economy on page 11 are correct, or if you need to change them.

2.8 The influence of the Church

ARCHBISHOPS



BISHOPS



PRIESTS

The Anglo-Saxon Church influenced life in England in two ways:

- 1 It was very rich and powerful and played an important part in the government of the country.
- 2 It played a big part in everyday life in all villages and towns.

The Church, power and government

The Church was very clearly organised. At the top were the two archbishops, of Canterbury in the south and York in the north. Each archbishop was in charge of the Church in his region. There were also about fifteen bishops, each one in charge of an area called a diocese or see. The bishops were responsible for making sure the village priests obeyed the Church's laws and carried out religious services properly.

There were also many abbeys – monasteries and convents, which housed monks and nuns respectively. They were headed by abbots (monasteries) and abbesses (nunneries). The main task of the monks and nuns was to pray, but they also wrote histories, created beautiful tapestries and acted as teachers and advisers to lords. Selling crops grown on monastery farms also made the monasteries wealthy. The Church was therefore a very powerful and rich organisation. It owned 25 per cent of the land in England. Its archbishops and bishops were often members of the Witan and acted as royal advisers.

The Church and everyday life



Anglo-Saxons believed that Heaven and Hell were real places. They knew that after death their souls would go to Heaven or Hell, depending on how religious they had been and how well they had lived. Therefore it was vital for their souls that people went to church to worship God. This meant that the priest in each village had a very important role, safeguarding the people and their souls.

People also prayed regularly because they knew that God played a major part in their everyday lives. They believed that God sent diseases or healed the sick and sent good harvests or bad harvests which decided whether they had enough to eat through the winter and spring. Religion also played a big part in celebrations and holidays. People did not work on the major **Holy Days** of the religious year – Christmas, Easter and others – and they celebrated **saints' days**, often with feasting and games. This meant that they had plenty of opportunity for time away from work in the fields.

Visible learning

Church and churches

The word 'church' has two meanings. Church with a large C is the organisation which is in charge of religion.

In contrast, church with a small c is the building in which religious services are held.

Using 'Church' and 'church' in the right ways shows you understand the difference and the topic.

▲ Most churches and cathedrals were rebuilt after the Norman Conquest and during the period from 1100–1500, but some Anglo-Saxon churches remain. This is the tower of the church in Earls Barton which was built in the late tenth century.

Discuss if the words you chose from the Word Wall to describe the Anglo-Saxon Church on page 11 are correct, or if you need to change them.

