

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 61:
EARLS AND CHURLS**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 61: Earls and Churls. In this episode, we’re going to continue to look at the politics and culture of England in the first half of the eleventh century leading up to the Norman Conquest. We’ll explore the development of a new noble class in England – the earls. They were most powerful nobles second only to the king himself. And with England being ruled by a Scandinavian king who was often out of the country, those earls were in a position to play an even greater role in English politics. We’re also going to look at the Anglo-Saxons commoners – the peasants who worked in the fields and on the farms. These people were sometimes known as churls. And we’re going to look at their life in the countryside. So we’ll examine the many Old English words associated with farming and the rural life in England.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can always reach me at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com. And I am on twitter @englishhistpod.

Now this time, we’re going to continue to draw a little closer to the year 1066. And I want to begin by emphasizing that the Norman Conquest didn’t just change England politically and linguistically. It also rearranged the social and economic system. The Normans brought the so-called ‘feudal system’ with them from France. That included many of the things which we associate with medieval England – things like armored knights, massive castles, the code of chivalry, and a highly regimented social structure. By this point in our story, that system was already in place in much of the old Carolingian Empire – basically modern France and Germany.

But the situation was a bit different in England. Now from a modern perspective, the two systems look very similar. Both had a class of unfree slaves or serfs. Both relied upon peasants to do much of the hard work and labor. Both had a warrior class – the knights of the feudal system and thegns of Anglo-Saxon England. And they both had class of nobles and lords. But if we look at little closer, we see that the English system was a little more flexible. It was a little easier to move from one class to another on that side of the channel. But it was still very regimented, and Anglo-Saxon law treated people within each class differently. The wergild or man money that had to be paid for the commission of crime varied depending on the victim’s class. The penalty was much greater for killing a warrior or thegn than for killing a lowly peasant. And the penalty was greater for a peasant than a slave. So these social classes mattered. And before we move on the Normans and the feudal system, I want to take this opportunity to examine the Anglo-Saxon system which was soon to be replaced. And I really want to focus on the people near the bottom rungs of that ladder – the peasants. They did much of the hard work in what was still an agricultural society. And that farming culture left English with a lot of common, everyday words.

So let’s begin this episode where we left off last time with the reign of King Canute – the Dane who conquered England in 1016. So we begin about half century before the Norman Conquest. But at this point, the Norman threat wasn’t really on anybody’s mind. Everybody’s attention was focused on the new Scandinavian conqueror and king.

As we saw last time, Canute's reign got off to a rocky start. His Danish troops occupied the county, and he soon levied a massive Danegeld. But he smoothed over many of those problems with a great assembly at Oxford where he basically agreed to rule England as an 'English' king under English law. That compromise provided the stability which he needed, and he actually enjoyed a very long reign of almost twenty years. And during that time, he was generally regarded a good king who oversaw a return to peace and prosperity.

Early on, Canute made two decisions which shaped the future of England. The first concerned his wife, and the other concerned the administration of the kingdom. So let's start with his wife because those developments really help to set the background for the events of 1066.

As you may recall, Canute was a teenager when he came to England when his father, Sweyn Forkbeard. Sweyn had landed in the north of England and he found some support there. To seal his alliance with the local nobles, Sweyn arranged a marriage between his son Canute and the daughter of a local nobleman. Her name was Ælfgifu, and she and Canute had two sons named Sweyn and Harold.

But then Canute became king. He was a Danish ruler on English soil. And he had brought an end to the Wessex line of kings which had stretched back to Alfred the Great – and really beyond that all the way to the 600s. Aethelred the Unready was now dead. But Aethelred's wife, Emma of Normandy, was still living. And their two children were still living. And here was the problem for Canute. Those young sons were in exile in Normandy with Emma's brother the Duke of Normandy. Those two sons were half English and half Norman – half Aethelred's and half Emma's. The Duke of Normandy was their uncle, and there was a real possibility that he might try to return his young nephews to the throne in England with his sister Emma as their regent. So how did Canute deal with this problem? Simple. He decided to marry Emma himself. He would just step into Aethelred's shoes and make Emma his queen. That would probably satisfy the Norman Duke. Of course, there was one problem with that plan. Canute was already married. But that was a problem with an easy solution. The first wife was sent back to Mercia, and Emma returned as Queen – for the second time.

This type of arrangement wasn't really that unusual in the Middle Ages. It was quite common for a conquering king to marry the widow of a deposed king. It provided a connection to the prior regime and a degree of legitimacy. And in this case, it solved the Norman problem. And Emma appears to have been receptive to the arrangement. Better to be the Queen and retain her estates in England than be a former queen in exile dependent upon her family in Normandy. So the marriage was quickly arranged, and that left England with a Danish King and Norman Queen. And that's really the key going forward. From now on, both the Scandinavians and the Normans will have claims to the English crown through Canute and Emma. And those claims won't be resolved until back-to-back battles in the year 1066.

Shortly after that marriage of Emma and Canute, a child was born to the marriage named Harthacanute, and being a child of this official union, Harthacanute was considered to be his father's successor. Whenever Canute's reign came to an end, Harthacanute would just step right in as the new king. But as we'll see, it didn't work out that way.

So if you're keeping track, we have five children here with some claim to the throne at Canute's death. We have Aethelred the Unready's two children with Emma who are still in exile in Normandy. We have Canute's new son with Emma – Harthacanute – the presumptive heir. And we have those other two children from Canute's first marriage to Aelgifu – the Mercian noble's daughter. So five children, but just two fathers, Aethelred and Canute, and just two mothers, Emma and Aelgifu. And Aethelred was already dead. So when Canute died several years later, that just left the two mothers of those five children. And ultimately, those two mothers fought each other behind the scenes to determine which of those five children would be the next king. But we'll deal with all of that intrigue next time. For now, we just need to know that the stage had been set for a battle royal when Canute died – literally a battle 'royal.'

Now I noted that Canute made two decisions early in his reign which were important to the history of England. One was his marriage to Emma, which left a lot of competing heirs. The other was a major change to the way England was administered.

Up to this point, local government had been based on the old shire system. Each shire had an ealdorman who was the leading official in the shire. The term *ealdorman* still survives as the word *alderman* which is typically a town or city official today. Most ealdormen oversaw a single shire, but some had authority over more than one. There were usually about a dozen ealdormen serving at any one time, and again they were the leading nobles under the king.

But now, Canute decided to change all of that. He divided England into four basic territories. And those territories were the traditional Anglo-Saxon kingdoms – Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria and East Anglia. He then designated a local official to be in charge of each of those four regions. That person was called a *jarl* – an Old Norse term. So England went from about a dozen ealdormen to just four jarls. And that meant those jarls had a lot more power and territory than the traditional English ealdormen.

Over time, that Norse term *jarl* became Anglicized. It went from *jarl* to *earl*. That change was probably influenced by that older term *ealdorman*. But that means we are now officially in the era of the English earls. And each of those traditional kingdoms like Wessex and Mercia and Northumbria now became known as *earldoms*. So that very English term *earl* is actually a Norse term.

Canute then appointed the earls who would oversee those four earldoms. Northumbria and East Anglia roughly corresponded to the old Danelaw region. So Canute appointed Scandinavians as the earls in those two regions. In Wessex, the traditional homeland of the English monarchy, Canute appointed himself as earl, at least for the time being. He established his royal court in Wessex at the traditional capital of Winchester. That left Mercia. And up in Mercia, an Anglo-Saxon noble named Leofric soon became the earl.

Now unless you're a fan of Anglo-Saxon history, you've probably never heard of Leofric of Mercia. But you probably have heard of his wife, especially if you are a fan of chocolate. So let me explain.

His wife was known by a very common Anglo-Saxon name, *Godgifu*, which was literally ‘God’s gift.’ But over time, that name evolved from *Godgifu* to *Godiva*. And this is the same Godiva whose name and likeness were later appropriated by the famous chocolate company. And the legend of Godiva actually gives us a very common English term.

So what is the legend of Godiva? Well, the legend itself didn’t appear until the 1200s – a couple of centuries later. So historians doubt its validity. But according to the story, Leofric had imposed heavy taxes on the people of Mercia. And this is in keeping with what we saw last time where taxes were a heavy burden on people in the countryside. So Godiva appealed to her husband to repeal some of the taxes. Leofric refused, but Godiva continued to beg him to drop the taxes. So he eventually relented, and he told Godiva that he would repeal the taxes if she would strip naked and ride through the streets of town on a horse. He apparently thought that would be the end of it, but Godiva took him up on the offer. She rode through town naked, and Leofric held up his end of the bargain and repealed the taxes. Supposedly, during the famous ride, the people were ordered to stay inside and close their shutters so no one could leer at Godiva as she rode through town. But one man named Tom couldn’t help himself. He looked anyway, and he was struck blind in the process. And Tom became known to history as ‘Peeping Tom’ – the ultimate origin of our modern term ‘Peeping Tom’ meaning a voyeur.

Now even though historians doubt that the real Godiva ever rode through town naked, the legend of Godiva captured the imagination of many people in the Middle Ages. But it is interesting that this famous legend is really a story about excessive taxes. Godiva wasn’t an exhibitionist, not as far as we know, she just wanted to lessen the tax burden on the people.

And that takes us back to the last episode where I discussed the heavy burden of taxation during this period. As I noted, those taxes contributed to the process by which many small landowners lost their independence, and they were forced to turn to a local lord for protection and support. Over the years, the Vikings had raided and killed peasants and burned crops. And there was the occasional bad harvest and famine. All of this put a heavy burden on the peasants, especially the few who remained free landowners.

In Old English, a peasant was sometimes called a *ceorl*. That word still exists in Modern English, especially the English dialects of Britain. It exists today as *churl* – a somewhat pejorative term. And it also exists as an adjective. We might describe someone’s boorish or bad behavior as *churlish*. But the ultimate meaning of *churl* was a peasant or common farmer. And those peasants or churls lived a hard and difficult life. But they didn’t occupy the lowest rung of the social ladder. That was reserved for the slaves. Slavery was legal, and there were specific laws which applied to them. So they represented a specific social class. And it was very easy to move from being a peasant down to a slave.

Slavery was a punishment for certain crimes, so a peasant who committed one of those crimes would be forced into slavery. But beyond that, when circumstances became dire enough, some peasants sold themselves or their children into slavery because they had no other options. And the situation had gotten so bad during Aethelred’s reign, that more and more people had been sold in this manner.

Now I should also note here that it was possible for a slave or peasant to move up the ladder as well. If you were a slave, you could theoretically buy your way out of slavery or someone else could buy you out. And then you would move up to peasant class where you enjoyed a few more rights and privileges. But it was actually pretty rare for slaves to move up in this manner. There weren't a lot of benefactors buying people out of slavery.

Similarly, a peasant could also move up the social ladder. The next level up was the class of thegns or skilled warriors. So generally speaking, this class was similar to the knights in continental Europe. If a peasant acquired enough acres of land, he could make this move. But again, that didn't happen very often because peasants could barely survive as it was. They were lucky to keep what they had. So they didn't tend to expand their holdings over time. Above the thegns was the noble class, which included the traditional ealdormen and the new class of earls created by Canute. So that was the Anglo-Saxon social and economic class system. But for now, I want to focus on those at the bottom of that class system – the peasants and the slaves

Even though peasants and slaves represented two different social classes, their actual lifestyles were often quite similar. They both worked the land. And by this point, many peasants had become beholden to a local lord. Those obligations to the lord were often overwhelming. Last time, we looked at Aelfric's Colloguy which described the life of a plowman. Even though he may have been a peasant, he describes a life that wasn't much different from that of a slave. He was still beholden to a lord, and he even remarked that his life was hard because he was not free. He was 'bound' to the land and his lord in a state of 'bondage.' In an earlier episode, we saw that the word *bondage* actually came from this situation. *Bondage* came from the word *bonda*, which was an Old Norse word for a peasant or a land dweller. It gave us *husbonda* or *husband* – literally a 'house dweller.' And it also produced the word *bondage*, which was the state or condition of the *bonda* or peasant.

At one time, there had been a lot more free peasants who farmed their own land. They had used primitive plows which barely broke the top layer of soil. But by now, in the early eleventh century, all of that had changed. The heavy wheeled plow had made its way to Britain. It dug deep into the earth, and it allowed for better yields. But it required a team of eight oxen to pull it, and no peasant owned eight oxen. It was also incredibly difficult to turn the plow at the end of a row. So it really required large open fields. So the Anglo-Saxon peasants had started to pool their oxen and the land together. Cooperative or common fields were now the norm. The peasants would share their oxen, and they would dig very long rows so the plow didn't have to be turned as much. Each peasant would take a certain number of rows. And he could keep the yield from that strip.

In many cases, the farms were adjacent to a manor house where the lord lived. This was increasingly the norm. The lord gave them protection from Vikings or other marauders.

In those cases, the peasants kept what they produced from their own strip of land, but then they had to turn around and pay large sums to the lord in exchange for the right to farm the land and in exchange for the lord's protection. And they also had to work the lord's lands for two or three days each week, depending on the time of the season. So it was an incredibly tough life. The

peasant may not have been a slave under the law, but he wasn't really free either. Despite the difficult circumstances, the peasants produced the food which fed the nation. So they played a very important role in Anglo-Saxon society.

In Aelfric's Colloquy, the teacher asks a student playing the role of a King's advisor: 'What are the most important skills to have?' The reply is "Eorþtilþ, forþam se yrþling fett us ealle." Literally, 'Earth tilling, for the earthling feeds us all.'

First of all, note also that Aelfric uses the word *yrþling* for plowman. It is literally an 'earthling' – one who works the earth. In an earlier episode, I noted that *plow* was actually borrowed from Old Norse, so the word *plow* hadn't yet entered the West Saxon writing dialect which Aelfric used. So a *yrþling* was a person who worked the earth or land. And notice what he calls that process: *Eorþtilþ* – literally 'earth tilling.'

He didn't use the words *farming* or *agriculture* because those words weren't in the language yet. *Farming* is a French word, and *agriculture* came directly from Latin. So if you 'till the earth' or 'till the land,' you're using Old English. But if you *farm*, you're using French. And if you 'practice agriculture,' you're using Latin.

Now, I sometimes say that if you want to hear Old English, talk to young children. That's because most of the core vocabulary which young children tend to use comes from Old English. As they get older, and their vocabulary grows, they tend to add words which were borrowed from other languages. A good example of this is *dirt* and *soil*. Children play in the *dirt* and get *dirty*. *Dirt* is an Old English word. But adults plant flowers and trees in the *soil* – a French word that came with the Normans.

Since farming was such a basic and fundamental activity in Anglo-Saxon culture, it's not surprising that many of our agricultural terms are Old English. The word *harvest* is Old English. Another Old English word for 'harvest' was *ern*. Peasants worked and toiled the land in hopes of a plentiful 'ern,' and when that 'ern' finally occurred, they had 'earned' it. And that is how we got the modern word *earn* ('e-a-r-n') meaning 'to acquire through work.' But it originally was a noun meaning *harvest*.

The peasants working the fields were grain farmers. *Grain* is actually a French word which came with the Normans. But in an early episode, we looked at the standard sound changes of Grimm's Law. And one of those changes was the shift of the Indo-European 'G' sound to a Germanic 'K' sound. Under that change, the word which produced *grain* in Latin eventually produced *corn* in English. So *grain* and *corn* are actually cognate. *Corn* was originally a generic term for *grain*, so it retained that original Indo-European sense. And it still retains that general sense in Britain. But American English uses the word to mean maize or what was once known as 'Indian corn.'

One type of grain or corn grown by Anglo-Saxon peasants was *wheat*. *Wheat* is an Old English word. Wheat is a very light colored grain, so you might not be surprised that the word *wheat* comes from the same root as *white*. *Wheat* was basically the 'white grain.'

The peasants also grew oats and barley. And again, both *oats* and *barley* are Old English words. An *oat* was *ate*, and *oats* were *atan*.

Barley was originally *bere*. Something that was ‘barley-like’ was *bærlic* (/barely/), originally an adjective. But over time, the adjective *bærlic* replaced the noun *bere*, and that produced the word *barley*. But before that happened, a place where you kept or stored cut barley was a ‘barley house.’ It combined the words *bere* meaning ‘barley’ and *aern* meaning ‘house.’ And it produced the Old English word *bere-ærn*. But over time, that compound word got compressed into a single syllable and *bere-ærn* became *barn*. So believe it or not, *barn* was once a compound word meaning the ‘barley house.’

Once those grains were harvested, they were sometimes ground into meal. *Grind* is an Old English word, unrelated to *grain* by the way. *Grind* has an Indo-European root which also gives us the Old English words *grit* and *gritty*, referring to small particles. Of course, in the American south, people eat *grits* – a type of ground corn. But *grits* goes back to Old English where it was *grytta*.

Ground grains were often used to make a thick porridge which people ate. This same ‘grainy’ Germanic root word was used by the Franks across the channel in what became France. And their version of the word passed into French where it produced the word *gruel* – a common word for that type of thick porridge in the Middle Ages. The food also existed in Anglo-Saxon England. The Old English version was *gruta*. Over time, English adopted the Frankish-French version which was *gruel*, and the original English word *gruta* became *grout*. And we still use that term *grout* to refer to the thick paste or mortar which you use between tiles.

This same ‘grainy’ Indo-European root word also passed into the Celtic languages spoken in Western Europe before the Romans arrived. I don’t get a chance to mention Celtic root words very often because there aren’t very many of them in Modern English. But the Celtic version of this root was *gravo*. And French borrowed that Celtic or Gaulish word, and it became *gravel*. So all of that means that *grind*, *grit*, *grits*, *gruel*, *grout* and *gravel* are cognate.

In addition to that root word for grinding, there was another Indo-European root word which meant ‘to rub, grind or make soft.’ And that root is also common in Modern English. That root was *mele*. In Old English, it produced the word *meal* which meant ‘ground grain.’ And we still have that sense in words like *oatmeal* and *cornmeal*. By the way, the word *meal*, as in we had a large ‘meal,’ is unrelated to this word for ground grain. The word *meal* as in lunch or dinner evolved out of another Old English word during the Middle English period. Since both words are pronounced and spelled the same way today, a lot of people think they are closely related or cognate. But they’re not.

Of course, if you need some oatmeal or cornmeal, you might go to a ‘mill,’ a place where grains are ground. So a *mill* (m-i-l-l) makes *meal* (m-e-a-l). Both of those words are cognate. The word *mill* (m-i-l-l) existed in Old English, but it originally came from the Latin version of that original Indo-European root word. It was one of the earliest words borrowed from Roman traders by the Germanic tribes many centuries earlier. That Latin root also produced later English words like

molar – the back tooth that grinds food. It also produced the word *mallet* – a tool that is used to pound or grind materials into smaller bits.

Now when these grains were ground down, they were sometimes steeped in water, and that produced the word *malt* – another Old English word likely from this same root. If those malted grains were fermented, it produced *ale* – another Old English word. Anglo-Saxon ale didn't use hops. Hops are a type specific of plant which are added to the brewing process, and it gives beer its bitter flavor and also tends to make the beer stronger. Hops were introduced to England from the Germanic regions of northern Europe in the 1400s. And that malted liquor made with hops became known as *beer* to distinguish it from the traditional ale. Today, all of it uses hops, so most of the old distinctions between *beer* and *ale* have been lost. Even though the word *beer* later came to mean the beverage made with hops, the word *beer* actually existed in Old English as *beor*. But during that earlier period, it was used much more generally to mean any type of strong or fermented drink. So it could refer to ale or it could refer to mead, which was made from honeycombs.

Now during the Anglo-Saxon period, if you just wanted to quench your thirst, you would probably drink ale. And that was because water was often unsafe to drink. It contained a lot of impurities and it would make people sick. But the boiling and brewing process used to make ale actually took care of those problems. So ale was much safer to drink than water. It also didn't have the same alcohol level. So people didn't just drink ale like water, they often drank it in place of water.

So grain produced ale, which was a very common beverage. But grain was also used to produce something else which no Anglo-Saxon could live without, and that was bread. In prior episodes, we have seen how important bread was. People didn't have access to a lot of meat, so they really relied upon bread. And bread could be baked year round, even in the middle of winter when there wasn't a lot of other food around.

Going back to Aelfric's Colloquy, he included a baker as one of his common people interviewed by the teacher. And the Colloquy gives us a picture of how important the baker's job was in Anglo-Saxon society. The teacher asks:

“Bæcere, hwam fremap oþþe hwæþer we butan þe magon lif adreogan?” – ‘Baker, how does your skill benefit us, and can we live our lives without it?’

The student – playing the role of baker – replies, “Ge magon þurh sum fæc butan na lancge ne to wel” – ‘You can live without my skill for some time, but not long nor too well.’

“soplice butan cræfte minion” – ‘because without my craft,’

“ælc beod æmtig byþ gesewen” – literally, ‘each board empty be seen,’ but it means ‘each board or table will appear to be empty.’

So without the baker's skill, everyone's table will be empty. And people will struggle to live.

So bread was a fundamental part of the Anglo-Saxon diet. We've seen before that the Old English word for bread was *hlaf*, which became *loaf*. And that word produced the compound terms 'loaf guardian' and 'loaf maiden' which became *lord* and *lady* over time. So given our overall theme of 'Earls and Churls,' here we see how grain and bread led to the words used for nobility. *Lord*, *lady* and *loaf* are all cognate.

I can even make a connection between bread and the legend of Lady Godiva. I noted that she rode through town on a horse while she was naked or nude. By the way, *naked* and *nude* are cognate. They both came from the same Indo-European root word. *Nude* is the version which came in from Latin. But *naked* is the word which came in through Old English, so as it so often the case, we have two different ways of saying the same thing – one Latin and one from Old English. The Old English version of 'naked' was *nacod*. And just as today, it meant bare or uncovered. Well, that same Indo-European root word passed into Sanskrit where it became *nagna*. In was a common practice among the early Indo-European settlers in central and south Asia to cook meat by covering it in hot coals and ashes. But bread had to be cooked on top of the coals. So it was uncovered. And that Sanskrit word *nagna* meaning 'uncovered,' eventually proceed the word *naan* for a type of bread prepared in India. So *naan* is actually cognate with the words *naked* and *nude*. They all refer to some state of being uncovered. So that's the connection between Lady Godvia and bread.

There is another linguistic connection between bread and nobility if you think about it. Those people at the upper echelons of society are sometimes called the 'upper crust.' One theory about the origin of the phrase 'upper crust' is that it was customary to serve a full loaf of bread and have people tear off pieces when they ate it. But commoners weren't supposed to touch the portion of the bread which the noblemen ate. So very often, the upper crust was sliced off and presented to the noblemen. And the nobles became known as the "upper crust." Now frankly, I'm very skeptical about that theory because the term 'upper crust' as a synonym for wealthy or powerful people didn't occur in writing until the 1800s. So it's origins are probably much more recent.

But either way, we still associate bread with wealth and power. Think about our slang words for money – words like *bread* and *dough*. 'You got any bread on you?' 'Let me borrow some dough.' So there's still a connection between bread and money. Of course, if you get a good job and make some dough, that makes you a *breadwinner*.

I should note here that the term *breadwinner* also dates to the 1800s, but it uses the term *winner* in its original Old English sense. And that's why the term *breadwinner* may seem like an odd expression today. It didn't mean that you won some bread in a contest. The word *win* is an Old English word, and it originally meant "to labor, toil, or work at something." So if you are a *breadwinner*, you are a person who strives or works hard for bread, both in its literal sense and in its figurative sense as money. Over time, the word *win* came to refer the 'hard work or struggle' associated with a fight or a contest with another person. And that led to the modern sense of *win* meaning to be successful and achieve victory.

So the Old English word for ‘bread’ was *loaf*. But the word *bread* did exist in Old English. The history of the word *bread* has generated a lot of debate among scholars because a version of the word existed in both Old English and Old Norse. But the meanings were different in each language. The Norse word *brauð* meant bread. But the English word *bread* meant a small bit or piece of something. It probably come from the same root as *break*. So it appears that English speakers mixed up those two words over time, and English *bread* acquired that Norse meaning which we still use today.

Now I noted that some scholars think that the original English word *bread* came from the same root as the word *break*. And in fact, since the early Middle English period, English has had the phrase ‘breaking bread’ to mean ‘having a meal with someone.’ In fact, having bread together was a communal activity. And the people with whom you shared bread were your close friends. Again this is reflected in several words in Modern English.

The original Proto-Germanic language had a word for a close friend which combined the Germanic words for ‘with’ and ‘bread.’ So your close friend was your ‘with bread’ – in other words, the person with whom you shared your bread. The word was rendered in Gothic as *gahlaiba*. Now that Germanic word for a close friend never made it into Old English, but it did make into the Frankish dialects. And from there, the Romans picked it up. Very often, the Romans would take a Germanic term and do a direct translation into Latin. And that’s what they did here. The Germanic word meant ‘with bread.’ So they took the Latin word for ‘with,’ which was *com*, and the Latin word for ‘bread,’ which was *panis*, and they put those two together. The result was the word *companion*. And the Normans brought that Latin word with them to England where it entered English shortly after the Norman Conquest. So your *companion* is literally the person with whom you share bread. Of course, a group of companions is a *company* using those same two root words. And again, *company* came with the Normans.

In addition to that compound which meant ‘with bread,’ the original Germanic language had another term with a very similar meaning. This other term meant ‘with food.’ So it was the same basic idea. It just used the word for ‘food’ rather than the word for ‘bread.’ The original Germanic term was **ga-maton*. *Ga* was ‘with,’ and *maton* was ‘meal.’ Again, this was your friend or companion. But over time, the *ga-* part at the front was dropped. And that left *maton*, which became *mate*. So your *mate* is literally the person with whom you have food or have a meal. Now this word came into English during the Middle English period from the Germanic dialects around the Netherlands and northern Germany.

That same Germanic word did pass into Old English as the word *mete*. And in Old English, *mete* meant ‘meal.’ One type of food served at a *mete* was animal flesh. And by the 1300s, that word *mete* had come came to describe the animal flesh consumed at mealtime. And that gave us the word *meat*. So if you have ‘meat’ with your ‘mate,’ you’re just using two different versions of the same Germanic word – a word which originally meant a ‘meal.’ *Meat* is the native English version, and *mate* is the version borrowed from the Germanic dialects of northern Europe.

Since food was scarce in Anglo-Saxon England, most people only ate one big meal a day. It was typically in the afternoon, so it was basically the equivalent of our modern dinner. In the periods between that large meal each day, people didn't tend to eat very much. They slept at night and worked most of the day. But they did usually have a small meal or snack to get the day started. This smaller morning meal was called the *undernmete* or *morgenmete*. It was literally the 'morning meal.' *Morgen* was 'morning,' and *undern* was another word for 'morning.' And again, we see *mete* being used as the word for a 'meal.'

So this small morning meal broke up that long period between dinners when there wasn't much to eat. That meant that the people were basically fasting between those larger afternoon meals. And that morning meal broke up the daily fast. So by the 1400s, that morning meal became known as the 'break-fast' – or *breakfast*. It literally meant the break in the daily fast.

Now as we've seen, grain farming was a basic activity of Anglo-Saxon peasants, but they also raised livestock. Livestock not only provided meat, it also provided dairy products like milk and butter. And not surprisingly, *milk* and *butter* are both Old English words. Of course larger animals were used as draft animals to pull wagons and plows. Those large animals included cows and oxen. Again, those are Old English words. We've seen *oxen* before. *Cow* was *cu* in Old English. *Calf* and *bull* were also Old English words. So you can see how these common words for animals were inherited from the Anglo-Saxons.

Another common animal kept by peasants was the pig. During this period, pigs in England were dark and hairy. They actually resembled wild boars. The primary Old English word for a pig was *swin*, which is pronounced 'swine' today. They also had the word *sow*. Just as a 'cow' was *cu*, a 'sow' was a *su*.

Interestingly, the most common Modern English words for this animal are not attested in the surviving Old English writings. Today, we call this animal a *pig* or a *hog*. Both words are attested in very early Middle English, but not Old English. However, most scholars don't think those words came in from French. They were likely words which existed in Old English, but they just didn't get captured for posterity in the surviving texts.

The earliest use of the word *hog* in the 1100s includes references to not only young pigs, but also young sheep and horses. So *hog* was originally a word used for young animals of all types, especially farm animals. And it was later restricted to pigs. But that original sense of the word as a 'young animal' survives in the phrase 'to go whole hog.' The *hog* here is actually a young sheep. So let me explain.

Peasants didn't really like having to shear young sheep or lambs because their fleece was short and it was difficult to cut. So a lot of times, they didn't even bother to shear them when they were young. When they did decide to shear them, peasants would usually just keep it simple and remove what they could. But sometimes, the peasant actually expended the time and energy and sheared all of the wool off the lamb. In that case, it was said that he 'went whole hog.' So again, the word *hog* was being used in its original sense as a young animal – in this case a lamb.

Now sheep were by far the most common animal kept by Anglo-Saxons. England was famous for its production of wool. So not surprisingly, words like *lamb* and *sheep* were both inherited from Old English. A group of sheep was a *flock* – another Old English word, likely related to *folk*. So a group of people were the *folk*, and a group of sheep were the *flock*. A flock of sheep might also be called a *heord*. And the person who looked over the herd of sheep was the *sceap-hierde* – the ‘sheep herder.’ And over time, ‘sheep herder’ was shortened to simply *shepherd*.

As I noted, England developed a very lucrative trade in wool and textiles. So cloths and fabrics were common commodities. Within most households, the women and girls did the weaving and sewing. They couldn’t just go to a store and buy clothing or other fabrics. They had to make it themselves. So as we might expect, a lot of common knitting terms also go back to Old English. These include words like *sew*, *weave*, *braid*, and *yarn*. *Weave* comes from the same root which gives us *web* as in a spider web. The root of *weave* also passed through Dutch and gave us the word *waffle* – a type of food with a back-and-forth pattern on it.

The Anglo-Saxons also gave us the word *knit*, which comes from the same root as the word *knot*. And that silent ‘k’ at the beginning of *knit* and *knot* was actually pronounced in Old English. And that’s why it’s still there in Modern English.

Speaking of *knit* and *knot*, we also got the word *stitch* from Old English. It derives from the word *stick*. Just as today, *stick* could be both a noun and a verb. You could stick someone with a stick. And the puncture wound was called a *stice*’ (/stee-che/) – or *stitch*. That type of puncture tended to cause a sharp pain. And that stabbing feeling was also called a *stitch*. Sometimes if you laugh too much you get a pain in your stomach. And that led to the phrase ‘he had me in stitches,’ which uses the word *stitch* as a type of pain in its original sense. Of course, the process of sewing requires a needle to puncture a piece of fabric. So the resulting loop or connection was called a *stitch*. And by analogy it was later applied to a surgical suture, so today you might need ‘stitches’ for a bad cut.

Again, most of the fabrics produced by Anglo-Saxons were dependent upon sheep. And as I noted, sheep were often allowed to roam in common pastures and fields. Grazing animals usually fed themselves, but sometimes the peasants had to cut down or mow the fields for hay. And of course, they had cut down the crops when they were harvested. The original Indo-Europeans had a word for this process of cutting grass or grains. It was called **me*. And it led to the Old English word *mow*. It also led to a word for a pasture covered with grass which is cut for hay. That word was *meadow*. So *mow* and *meadow* are cognate.

Another related Old English word was *mæð* (/math/), but not the word meaning arithmetic. This was a different kind of *mæð*. It was basically the noun version of *mow*. So it was a mowing or cutting of grass. In Autumn, you had to get the *mæð* done. So it was sort of like the word *harvest*, which can be used as both a verb and a noun. So you can ‘harvest the harvest.’ Well, *mow* and *mæð* kind of worked the same way. You might mow the pasture. And when you were done, the *mæð* was prepared for harvest. As I said, the *mæð* was usually cut in the Autumn. But if it happened to be a mild Autumn, a second growth of grass would occur later in the season after the first cut. So a second cutting or ‘math’ had to be done. And that was called the

aftermath. And that where the modern word *aftermath* came from. Today, it means the fallout or consequences of some activity, but it originally, it meant the second mowing of a pasture.

So as you can see, Modern English owes a lot to the commoners who worked the land, and tended the animals, and baked the bread, and sewed the fabrics. So with that, I'm going to conclude this look at the culture of the peasants and churls. I'm going to take a quick break, but when I return, I'm going to turn the story back to the king and the earls. I'm going look at the end of Canute's reign as King of England, and I'm also going to examine the role of English during that period.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

In the second decade of the eleventh century, King Canute began to consolidate his power over England. And that power soon spread beyond the shores of Britain. His brother had succeeded his father as king of Denmark. But within a couple of years after Canute became King of England, his brother died in Denmark without any children. Canute was then selected as the new King of Denmark. So for now, England and Denmark were unified under the same ruler. And this was a crucial development. Canute now ruled Denmark where much of the Viking activity in England originated. Since Canute now ruled both nations, he put an end to those Viking raids. England soon enjoyed an extended period of peace. And that peace meant the Danegeld didn't have to be raised on a regular basis. All of that contributed to a renewed period of prosperity in England.

Despite his power and influence. Canute wasn't content with just being the King of England and Denmark. Later in his reign, he added Norway to his kingdom. And he even ruled part of southern Sweden and a region of northern Germany south of Denmark. No Scandinavian leader had ever amassed that much power and prestige.

This is actually an important point in our overall story for a couple of reasons. First, it meant that England was very much in the Scandinavian orbit at this point. Given all of the Viking activity in England over the past few centuries, and the settlement of Danes in the Danelaw, and the prominence of the Old Norse language, England was already within that Scandinavian sphere of influence. Despite the complicated history, the Anglo-Saxons had a great deal in common with the Danes and the other Scandinavians. Think about a poem like Beowulf. It wasn't about the Franks or the Germans. It was about the Danes and the Swedes. And think about that ship burial at Sutton Hoo in the Scandinavian tradition. In many ways, the Anglo-Saxons felt a closer connection to people on the other side of the North Sea than they did the people on the other side of the English Channel. That was certainly true in northern England where Scandinavian influences were greater. Sweyn Forkbeard had been welcomed there from Denmark with little opposition. So the Anglo-Saxons accepted a Danish king in a way that they probably wouldn't have accepted a French king or a German king.

And we actually have some proof for that. Just a few decades later, William would arrive from Normandy. And he had to brutally suppress opposition to his rule. But Canute was accepted as an English king and ruled as an English king with a large degree of popular support.

There is no doubt that language was a factor here. Canute and his Danish supporters spoke Old Norse, but as we've seen before, they could probably communicate with the native Anglo-Saxon nobles without too much difficulty, especially in the north.

Even though Canute was a Danish king, English continued to be spoken at his court. Again, this is in stark contrast to William. After William's conquest, he imposed the very different French language as the official language of England.

So even though Canute wasn't English, he was embraced in a way that William never was. And Canute embraced English culture. But that influence worked both ways. Over time, Scandinavian influences became more apparent in England as the country was slowly integrated into Canute's Scandinavian Empire. Now that influence had always been strong in the north, but now there is evidence that it was moving south, well beyond the traditional limits of the Danelaw. As we saw last time, a gradual migration was underway within the country. Peasants from the countryside were moving from the farms to towns and cities like London. That was bringing those Norse-influenced dialects further south to places like London.

I also noted that London had been loyal to the Wessex kings, so Canute largely avoided the city early on. He maintained his royal court at Winchester, the traditional Wessex capital. Winchester is near the southern coast of England, far removed from the Danelaw region. But with Canute's court now settled at Winchester, we start to see evidence of Scandinavian influences there as well.

At the Old Minster in Winchester, there is a grave marker which appears to commemorate a Scandinavian who died there during the time of Canute's reign. And the inscription on that grave marker shows how far south some of those Norse words had spread during this period.

The inscription reads "Her Lið Gunni: Eorles Feolaga." In Modern English, it reads 'Here lies Gunni, the Earl's Companion.'

The first two words are "Her Lið," which is 'here lies.' Those two words are Old English, but that phrase 'here lies' on a memorial or grave marker isn't found anywhere else in Old English. However, that phrase was common in Latin, and it was used on tombs and memorials which were inscribed in Latin. So it appears that this particular grave marker took that Latin phrase and translated it into English, producing that oldest known use of the phrase 'Here lies' on an English grave marker.

The inscription says 'Here lies Gunni,' and Gunni is an Old Norse name. It actually uses the same root as 'Gunnhilda' which we saw in the last episode. So it appears that Gunni was either a Dane or a descendant of a Dane.

The second part of the inscription is "Eorles Feolaga" – literally 'Earl's fellow' or 'the Earl's companion.' I noted earlier that the word *earl* is derived from the Norse word *jarl*. So here we already have the Anglicized version of that title being rendered as *earl*. And the last word is *feolaga* – or *fellow*. Again, this is an Old Norse word.

Feolaga – or *fellow* – has a construction very similar to *companion* and *mate* which we looked at earlier. Remember that those two words originally meant ‘with bread’ and ‘with food,’ respectively. So it referred to the close friends with whom you share a meal. Well, the Norse word *fellow* was literally a ‘fee layer.’ As we’ve seen before, *feo* meant ‘money or property.’ So a ‘fee layer’ was a person with whom you joined to contribute or ‘lay down’ money or property for some enterprise. So it was basically your business partner. It was a close companion with whom you shared money or resources.

So all of that means the inscription ‘Here lies Gunni: Earl’s Companion’ is mostly written in Old Norse. Only the opening words ‘here lies’ is in Old English, and that was apparently borrowed from Latin. So that inscription shows how English, Norse and Latin were mixing together as far south as Winchester during the time of Canute.

Now notice that the inscription says that Gunni was the ‘Earl’s Fellow’ or companion. So who was the earl? I noted earlier that Canute himself served as the first Earl of Wessex. But it’s unlikely that the inscription is referring to Canute because Canute would have probably been referred to as the ‘king’ – not the ‘earl.’ So it was probably the man who succeeded Canute as Earl of Wessex – a man named Godwin. And get used to that name, because he is really the central figure as we move forward to 1066.

When Canute’s brother died in Denmark in 1018, and Canute became King of Denmark, he traveled there to assume the crown. Since he was increasingly out of the country, Canute needed someone else to be the earl of Wessex. So he designated a local noble named Godwin as the new Earl. And presumably, Godwin was the earl referred to on Gunni’s grave marker.

Now I mentioned earlier that the integration of England into Canute’s Scandinavian Empire had two important consequences for our story. One was the continued spread of Norse influences throughout England. The other was the fact that Canute now had obligations outside of England. He spent a lot of time in Scandinavia running his territories there. He also made a pilgrimage to Rome. All of that meant that he wasn’t actually in England very much as his reign progressed. So in his absence, he turned over effective rule of the country to those four earls.

And Wessex had been the traditional power base of Anglo-Saxon politics. It was the wealthiest and most powerful earldom at this time. Its capital as Winchester was also the location of the royal court. So as the Earl of Wessex, Godwin quickly emerged as first among equals when it came to the four earls. His biggest rival was Leofric of Mercia – Godiva’s husband. But Godwin was very ambitious, and over time, he emerged as the most powerful man in England outside of the King. He was very close to Canute, and he even married a Danish woman in Canute’s court.

With Canute often out of the country, the earls were left in control of their respective territories. They were the top military leaders in their region, and they were in charge of the local justice system. Technically the king and witan appointed the earls. And they could remove the earls. But within a couple of decades, the office of ‘earl’ had become largely hereditary. If passed from father to son or to another immediate family member. So England was starting to look more and more like the old days with powerful regional leaders. But make no mistake, the earls didn’t

have independence. As long as Canute was around, the interest of the king was always paramount. Of course, things changed after Canute died. But for now, Canute kept those powerful earls in check. Everyone ultimately had to answer to Canute. He was still the most powerful man in the kingdom. And apparently, his courtiers were fond of reminding him of that.

This is reflected in a famous story about Canute's reign, which is probably just a legend. According to the story, Canute's courtiers loved to heap praise upon him and tell him that he was the most powerful person in the world. One day, a courtier told Canute that he was so powerful that everyone and everything obeyed his commands. Even the waves would obey him if he commanded the tide stay out. Canute apparently lost his patience with all of that praise. And to prove those claims to be absurd, he led his courtiers down to the edge of the sea as the tide was coming in. He sat down in a chair near the water and ordered the waves to retreat. But of course, the tide came in anyway. Canute then turned to all of the courtiers and reminded them that even the power of a king was limited. And as powerful as he was, his power was nothing compared to power of the tides which had been set in motion long before he was king and would continue long after he was gone. It is said that Canute never wore his golden crown after that day. Now this story was probably designed to illustrate that Canute retained his modesty and humility in spite of being the most powerful leader in northern Europe. But ultimately, he was right. Those tides did continue after he died. And that death came at the age of 38 in the year 1035.

While 38 wasn't exactly considered young at the time, he certainly could have ruled a lot longer. And it's always fun to speculate about what might have happened had certain events never occurred. And for centuries, scholars have wondered what England would look like today if Canute had ruled for another decade or so. If his succession had been better planned. If the power of earls like Godwin has been kept in check after Canute died. If all of that had prevented William from launching an invasion from Normandy. Of course, the answer is all speculation, but many scholars think England would have become much more integrated within Scandinavia over time, and it would have avoided all of its complicated entanglements with France over the next few centuries. All of those changes wrought by the Norman Conquest would never have happened. And England might very well be viewed today as a Scandinavian nation. And certainly the English language would be very different today. But of course, that's not what happened.

Canute did die at the age of 38. And his succession wasn't well planned. And all of that did lead to the ultimate invasion by William in 1066. So next time, we're going to see how all of that played out.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.