Anglo Saxons – Gift from a King

What was Anglo Saxon society like?

BL Cotton Tiberius A III – King Edgar sits beside St Dunstan and St Athelwold, bishops of Canterbury and Winchester.
Lesson at a Glance

Suitable For: KS2/KS4

Time Period: Anglo-Saxons

Curriculum Link: The Viking and Anglo-Saxon struggle for the Kingdom of England to the Time of Edward the Confessor

➢ Anglo-Saxon kingdoms

Learning Objective:

What can we learn about Anglo-Saxon rule from this grant from the king?

Resources needed:

Printed sources

Printed Tasks

Edgar the Peaceful

King Edgar came to the throne of Wessex at the age of sixteen in 959 after his elder brother, Eadwig, died. He carried on the peaceful rule of his ancestors and is believed to be King of England ruling over the other kings of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms, with the Kings of Scotland and Cumbria pledging allegiance at his coronation. He recalled the influential Bishop Dunstan (later St Dunstan) from exile who would go on to become Archbishop of Canterbury under Edgar’s reign. Dunstan, Oswald and Ethelwald, bishops of Worcester and Winchester, were very powerful as the heads of the Church, even shaping some of Edgar’s policies.

Despite ruling so long ago, Edgar’s reign is still visible in our lives today. It was during Edgar’s rule that England was divided into shires and hundreds for local governance. His coronation is the earliest to be described in detail and has formed the template for all coronations of English Royalty to this day.

Contents:

Teacher’s notes: ......................................................... 3
Source One: ............................................................... 4-5
What’s in a charter?: .................................................. 6-7
Tasks: ........................................................................ 8-11
This lesson provides pupils with a glimpse of Anglo-Saxon society through one of the oldest documents looked after by The National Archives. The document is not part of our standard collection of royal and governmental documents preserved for administrative purposes, but was instead presented to us for safekeeping in 1868.

This document is a charter, a formal statement of grant, making the recipient Ælfhere thane of a small area of what is now Devon. A thane is described as a man who held land granted by the king or by a military nobleman, ranking between an ordinary freeman and a hereditary noble. Ælfhere was given three hides of land, a measurement of potential income rather than area, showing a fairly sizeable gift for the minister’s loyalty.

Pupils can examine the content of the charter to recognise the influence of the King and the Church over the land and its people. Pupils could research Anglo-Saxon life to discover what the land could be used for, in terms of farming and woodland crafts. Pupils can consider the rights of the King to use land he has granted to others for his own purposes as described in the Charter, and why this would be necessary during the Anglo-Saxon period.

They can also research key figures mentioned within this charter, including King Edgar, Dunstan Archbishop of Canterbury and Oswald Archbishop of York. Dunstan’s influence on the church and royal ceremony, for example, is still recognisable in practices such as the coronation today. Edgar’s second wife, Ælfthrythe, mentioned in this charter, is also a key figure in history with several dramatic deaths surrounding her marriage and her sons. Her influence as an Anglo-Saxon Queen (the first to receive her own coronation) secured the reign of her son Elthered ‘the Unready’.

An Anglo Saxon charter has different purposes, usually either a ‘diploma’ granting land or powers, or a ‘writ’ providing instructions to be carried out. Occasionally charters could also act as wills, gifting land on the event of the writer’s death.

This charter falls into the category of diploma, and follows a fairly standard structure.

Sources

The main source used in this lesson is PRO 30/26/11 – A charter from King Edgar granting land to his Thane Ælfhere. It is recorded in the Sawyer Catalogue – a list of all known Anglo Saxon charters – as S795.

The charter was presented to The National Archives by H. Garling, esq., in November 1868.
What was Anglo Saxon society like?

Source One: King Edgar grants 3 hides of land to Ælfhere, his faithful minister

PRO30/26/11
Our Lord Jesus Christ reigneth for ever. It is advisable that every deed of gift should be made under the testimony of writing, lest the succession of posterity be swallowed in the whirlpool of rapine and the clouds of ignorance. Therefore I, Edgar, having by divine grace obtained the pre-eminence of royal rule over all Britain, being willing to endow with perpetual freedom a certain part of the country under my jurisdiction, do, in reward of his devoted service, grant unto Ælfhere, my faithful minister, three plots of ground in the place which is called in common parlance Nymed, that he may hold it, as we have above said, in perpetual inheritance, with all fields, woods, and meadows thereunto of right appertaining. Moreover, the aforesaid land is to be free of all secular tribute and royal service, excepting only going to the wars, and the building of bridges or castles. Whosoever therefore, moved by a benevolent and sincere disposition, shall trouble himself in amplifying this aforesaid grant, may the Parent of all increase and amplify his life in this present world, and may he and all his family happily experience the unclouded joys of that everlasting one to come. But may they who shall diminish or unjustly violate the same, which God forbid should enter into the minds of the faithful, make part with those of whom, on the other hand, it is pronounced, 'Depart from me, ye wicked, into everlasting fire,' unless they shall have made lawful satisfaction beforehand. This said land appears to be enclosed about by these bounds.

This is the landmere of the three hydes at Nymed - First, to Copelanstan; from that stone westwards on to the high road at Eisandune; then therefrom westward to the high road at Red Flood; therefrom to Sedgebrook's head; therefrom down Sedgebrook to where the stream strikes west; therefrom out on Heathfield to the ditch-head; from the ditch down on Hane; therefrom adown along stream to where Kushbrook strikes on Nymed; therefrom eastward on Eushbrook to Shipbrook; then up Shipbrook, and so back to Copelanstan.

Moreover, this aforesaid grant was made in the year of the Incarnation of our Lord, DCCCCLXXIIII. In the second Indiction. These are the witnesses of this grant, whose names are here written.

Edgar the King confirms his grant for life, Ælfthrythe the Queen agrees.

Dunstan Archbishop of Canterbury.
Oswold Archbishop of York,

Athelwold Bishop of Winchester,
Ælfstan Bishop of London,
Alfwold Bishop of Sherborne,
Ælfstan bishop of Ramsbury,
Cynewed bishop of Wells,
Ælfstan bishop of Rochester,
Ealdelm Bishop of Slesey,
Sideman bishop of Crediton,
Adulf bishop of Hereford,
Theodred bishop of Elmham,
Wulfaaige bishop of Cornwall,

Abbot Ælfric,
Abbot Æacwig,
Abbot Oagan,
Abbot Æthelgan,
Abbot Ælfnoth,
Abbot Sigan,
Abbot Ælfhere,
Abbot Æthelhuh,
Abbot Byrhteh,

Abbot Godwine,
Abbot Leofric,
Abbot Æthelsige,
Abbot Oswerp,

Ælfhere,
Æthelwine,
Oslac,
Ælfwerd,
Æthelwerd,
Eanulf,
Ælfsgie,
Æthelmær,
Leofwine,
Æthelwerd,
Wulfstan,
Byrhtmær,
Æthelsige.

Translation of the charter, made by W. B. Sanders, Esq., Assistant Keeper of Her Majesty's Records, as printed in: King, R. J., 'Coplestone Cross; and a Charter of Eadgar, A.D. 974', Transactions of the Devonshire Association 8 (1876), 351–59
What was Anglo Saxon society like?

What’s in a charter?

Contents

‘Invocation’ – calling on religion to show the charter has its blessing.

‘Proem’ – a statement on the shortness of life or a reason to be writing the charter

‘Grant’ – the actual gift of land or powers being given and their rewards

‘Sanction’ – any punishment for those who go against the rules.

‘Bounds’ – the specific area of land being gifted. (Written in Old English in this charter)

‘Date’ – when the charter was written.

‘Witnesses’ – the names of those who approve the gift.
Our Lord Jesus Christ reigneth for ever. It is advisable that every deed of gift should be made under the testimony of writing, lest the succession of posterity be swallowed in the whirlpool of rapine and the clouds of ignorance. Therefore I, Edgar, having by divine grace obtained the pre-eminence of royal rule over all Britain, being willing to endow with perpetual freedom a certain part of the country under my jurisdiction, do, in reward of his devoted service, grant unto Ælfhere, my faithful minister, three plots of ground in the place which is called in common parlance Nymed, that he may hold it, as we have above said, in perpetual inheritance, with all fields, woods, and meadows thereunto of right appertaining. Moreover, the aforesaid land is to be free of all secular tribute and royal service, excepting only going to the wars, and the building of bridges or castles. Whosoever therefore, moved by a benevolent and sincere disposition, shall trouble himself in amplifying this aforesaid grant, may the Parent of all increase and amplify his life in this present world, and may he and all his family happily experience the unclouded joys of that everlasting one to come. But may they who shall diminish or unjustly violate the same, which God forbid should enter into the minds of the faithful, make part with those of whom, on the other hand, it is pronounced, 'Depart from me, ye wicked, into everlasting fire,' unless they shall have made lawful satisfaction beforehand. This said land appears to be enclosed about by these bounds.

This is the landmere of the three hydes at Nymed - First, to Copelanstan; from that stone westwards on to the high road at Eisandune; then therefrom westward to the high road at Red Flood; therefrom to Sedgbrook's head; therefrom down Sedgbrook to where the stream strikes west; therefrom out on Heathfield to the ditch-head; from the ditch down on Hane; therefrom adown along stream to where Kushbrook strikes on Nymed; therefrom eastward on Eushbrook to Shipbrook; then up Shipbrook, and so back to Copelanstan.

Moreover, this aforesaid grant was made in the year of the Incarnation of our Lord, DCCCCLXXIIII. In the second Indiction. These are the witnesses of this grant, whose names are here written.

Eadgar the King confirms his grant for life, Ælfthrythe the Queen agrees.

Dunstan Archbishop of Canterbury.
Oswold Archbishop of York,

Athelwold Bishop of Winchester,

Ælfstan Bishop of London,
Alfwold Bishop of Sherborne,
Ælfstan Bishop of Ramsbury,
Cynewed bishop of Wells,
Ælfstan bishop of Rochester,
Ealdelm Bishop of Slesey,
Sideman bishop of Crediton,
Adulf bishop of Hereford,
Theodred bishop of Elmham,
Wulfajaige bishop of Cornwall,

Abbot Ælfric,
Abbot Æacwig,
Abbot Oagan,
Abbot Æthelgan,
Abbot Ælfnoth,
Abbot Sigan,

Abbot Ælfheh,
Abbot Byrhteh,
Abbot Godwine,
Abbot Leofric,
Abbot Æthsige,
Abbot Oswerd,

Ælfhere,
Æthelwine,
Byrhtnoth,
Oslac,
Ælfwerd,
Æthelwerd,
Eanulof, 
Ælfsige,
Æthelmær,
Leofwine,
Æthelwerd,
Wulfstan,
Byrhtmær,
Æthelsige.
What’s in a Charter? - Tasks

The structure of the charter can be explored in several ways.

1. Students could be given the highlighted charter and asked to assign the correct labels from the mixed list below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What’s in a charter?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Date’ – When the charter was written.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Sanction’ – any punishment for those who go against the rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Grant’ – the actual gift of land or powers being given and their rewards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Bounds’ – the specific area of land being gifted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Witnesses’ – The names of those who approve the gift.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Proem’ – a statement on the shortness of life or a reason to be writing the charter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Invocation’ – calling on religion to show the charter has its blessing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Students could be given one section of the charter and asked to present on its purpose. This could be a short paragraph, a discussion and feedback to the class, or a more creative output such as a poster.

3. Students could consider why the charter is laid out in this order and whether changing the order of the sections has any effect on the meaning or purpose of the document.

4. As this is a formal structure repeated in most charters of this type, students could consider why a formal structure is useful for grants of land and how the document would have been used at the time of its creation.

5. Students could attempt to write their own charter following this structure, granting a classroom table to a group of students or the seat next to them to their friend.
Tasks

The first line says: “Our Lord Jesus Christ reigneth for ever.”

- Why does a document about a gift of land start with a statement about Jesus Christ?
- The words ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ’ have been shortened from ‘domino nostro Jhesu Christo’ to ‘dno nro ihu xpo’. Why would the Anglo Saxons use shortened words for this phrase? (Hint: how often are they used?)
- Crosses are used to open key sections of the writing. What could the symbol mean? What does it represent? Why is it included in the document?

This section says: “I Edgar, by divine grace obtained … royal rule over all Britain”

- Can you spot the word ‘Britain’ in the original image?
- Who gives Edgar the right to be king? (Hint: What does ‘divine’ mean?)
- What does this show about what people accepted or believed at the time?

This section says: ‘in reward of his devoted service grant unto Ælfhere three plots of ground’

- What reward has Ælfhere been given?
- Is this a good reward?
- Why has he been given it?
What was Anglo Saxon society like?

**Tasks**

1. **Ælfhere has been given land ‘with all fields, woods and meadows’**
   - What can Ælfhere do with the land he’s been given?

2. **This section says: ‘free of all secular tribute and royal service, excepting only going to the wars and the building of bridges or castles.’**
   - Secular = non-religious. Royal service = duties to the king.
   - What does it mean for this land to be ‘free from royal service’?
   - What can Edgar still do with the land?

3. **This section says: ‘It is pronounced, ‘Depart from me, ye wicked, into everlasting fire,’”**
   - What will happen to anyone who goes against this charter and trespasses onto the land?
   - Trespass – to enter without permission

4. **‘Edgar the King confirms his grant for life, Ælfthrythe the Queen agrees. Dunstan Archbishop of Canterbury, Oswold Archbishop of York, Æthelwold Bishop of Winchester, Ælfstan Bishop of London’**
   - If the land has been given by the king, why do so many bishops and ministers sign it?
What was Anglo Saxon society like?

Tasks

- What year was this charter written? Can you find it, written in roman numerals, in the image above?
- Can you work out the three numbers written below and add them together to find the year?

I = 1, X = 10, L = 50, C = 100, D = 500

DCCCC =

LXX =

IIII =

This section of the Charter is written in Old English instead of Latin like the rest of the document. It lists the places that are covered in the gift so that everyone knows which area of land is being gifted. Why would this part be in a different language that the rest of the charter? What does it tell us about the people who lived in the area and the people who ruled the land?

Can you find these placenames in the document?
- Nymed
- Copelanstan (hint: copelanʃtan)
- Sedgbrook (hint: Secgbroc)
- Shipbrook (hint: ʃcipbroc)

The section says:

"This is the land described as the three hydes at Nymed: First, to Copelanstan; from that stone westwards on to the high road at Eisandune; then from there westward to the high road at Red Flood; from there to Sedgbrook's head; from there down Sedgbrook to where the stream strikes west; from there out on Heathfield to the ditch-head; from the ditch down on Hane; from there down along the stream to where Kushbrook strikes on Nymed; from there eastward on Eushbrook to Shipbrook; then up Shipbrook, and so back to Copelanstan."

This stone pillar is what remains of the 'Copplestone Cross', a stone that has been standing in this spot since the Anglo Saxon period.

- Can you find where it is mentioned in the charter?
- What other boundary markers can you find?
Did you know?

The National Archives Education Service also offers free taught sessions onsite in Kew and online.

You can book a free **Virtual Classroom** session, an online lesson where students can use individual computers to interact with our Education Officers and explore original documents without needing to travel to The National Archives. You will need computers or tablets for your students to work on either individually or in pairs.

A free **Video Conference** session allows our Education Officers to teach through your projector, leading discussions and guiding students through activities based around original documents. All you need is a computer with a projector, webcam and microphone to set up this web-chat with us.

Our **Onsite Workshops** are available for free here at The National Archives and allow students to experience genuine original documents reflecting over 1000 years of history. From Elizabeth I’s signature to the telegrams of the sinking Titanic, students love the wow-factor of being able to see real history on the desk in front of them.

---

**Find out more:**

👩‍💻 [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education)

👩‍💻 [www.facebook.com/TheNationalArchivesEducationService](http://www.facebook.com/TheNationalArchivesEducationService)

✉ [education@nationalarchives.gov.uk](mailto:education@nationalarchives.gov.uk)