Medieval History and Archaeology

# ANGLO-SAXON FARMS AND FARMING

Debby Banham
and Rosamond Faith

Medieval History and Archaeology

*General Editors*

JOHN BLAIR HELENA HAMEROW

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# MEDIEVAL HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

General Editors

John Blair Helena Hamerow

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# ANGLO-SAXON FARMS AND FARMING

DEBBY BANHAM AND ROSAMOND FAITH

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*In memory of Joan Thirsk*

# Preface

This book has been a long time in the making. It arose from the authors' frustration at having no reading to offer our students when we told them that farming was the most important part of the Anglo-Saxon economy. Our original intention was to write a textbook to fill that need, drawing on the work of other scholars in a range of fields. But it soon became obvious that the scholarly community—even our corner of it—had not been directing its efforts to providing material for us to synthesize. We have therefore spent the intervening years grappling with the primary sources (including the landscape itself) in all their variety and with all their problems, as well as taking advantage gratefully of the work that has been done in the field by others, to attack a wide range of questions, some of which even we had not thought of when we began. The result has been a book much bigger than we originally intended, but we hope that its size, and the long wait, will be justified by its usefulness and interest, not only to students, but also to more senior scholars, and to readers outside academe. It should be even more useful now that modern agriculture is almost entirely divorced from the tradition that went back to our period, and many of our readers are unlikely to be familiar with farming of any kind.

We have tried to give an overall picture of farming in Anglo-Saxon England, as well as an idea of the variety it encompassed. In doing so we have drawn on the expertise of a large number of people, some of whom, to our regret, are no longer with us to be thanked. We are immensely grateful to them all, and apologize for not listing them all here.

Among those to whom we are especially grateful for help and discussion over the years are our series editors, John Blair and Helena Hamerow. We would also like to thank the anonymous readers for the press, who have improved the book considerably. Ruth Parr and a series of editors at OUP have patiently tolerated our queries and delays. We are particularly grateful to David Pelteret for his patience and expert advice.

We would particularly like to thank all those who have given us the benefit of their practical experience with crops and livestock, including the Grazing Animals Projects run by Natural England, the National Trust and several local wildlife and conservation bodies, David Nicholls, Virginia Bainbridge, Mary Castell, Richard Kitchin of Withill, Mr Eyre of Collaton, Bruce Garside of the Berkshire Pig Company, Gill Swanton of North Farm, Overton, the staff and wardens of the Essex Wildlife Trust, the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, Butser Ancient

Farm, Burnham Beeches and Stoke Row Nature Reserve, Crickley Hill Country Park, Dr Rachel Ballantyne, Dr Mim Bower, Dr John Letts, Simon Damant of the National Trust at Wimpole Hall, and the staff, past and present, of Bede's World at Jarrow.

Rosamond Faith has been lucky enough to have walked landscapes in the company of, and learned from, David Austin, David Siddle, Andrew Fleming, and Pete Herring, and two inspiring groups: Exploring Early Farming, and the West Oxfordshire Boundary Walkers.

We have both benefited from many hours of discussion at seminars and conferences we have attended over the years, notably those of the Medieval Settlement Research Group and the Medieval Diet Group, as well as various meetings organized by Dr Susan Oosthuizen. We are grateful to all the organizers and participants.

We would like to thank Kelly Walter and Frank Goodingham for valuable practical help. Cath d'Alton has created the maps and Jane Peart the landscape drawings.

The publication of this book has been made possible by a grant from the Scouloudi Foundation in association with the Institute of Historical Research. The Marc Fitch Fund generously assisted with the cost of the illustrations, as did the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge. We are very grateful to both bodies, and to the Cassini Publishing Company for permission to reproduce its re-scaled First Edition Ordnance Survey maps free of charge, and to the Bodleian Libraries, the University of Oxford for permission to reproduce Cassini Historical Maps Old Series, 191. Copyright permissions for illustrations are acknowledged in the captions; while efforts have been made to trace the current owners of the copyrights of Zwemmer Publishing Ltd and West Air Photography, these have proved unsuccessful.

Most of all, we are grateful to each other for many stimulating and fruitful discussions over the years, and for extensive and helpful comments on each other's chapters. It is out of these debates that this book has grown.

We would like to dedicate this book to the memory of Joan Thirsk. Joan was a huge influence on us both, not only as a historian of agriculture, but also as a role model for female academics. We very much regret that Joan did not see the book completed, but we are glad that she knew it was to be dedicated to her.

Debby Banham and Rosamond Faith
Cambridge and Finstock, Oxfordshire

# Contents

*List of Plates* x
*List of Figures* xi
*List of Tables* xiii
*List of Abbreviations* xiv
*Note on Periodization* xv

1. Introduction 1

PART I

2. Arable farming in Anglo-Saxon England, I: The crops 19
3. Arable farming in Anglo-Saxon England, II: Tools and techniques 41
4. Animal husbandry in Anglo-Saxon England, I: The Livestock 75
5. Animal husbandry in Anglo-Saxon England, II: Livestock products and production 107

PART II

6. Farms in their landscapes 141
7. Coasts and riversides 163
8. Woodland 201
9. Chalk downland 223
10. Moorland 241
11. Wolds 259
12. Continuities and changes in arable husbandry 269
13. Conclusions 293

*Glossary* 301
*Bibliography* 303
*Index* 331

# List of Plates


1. January: ploughing, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. v, fo. 3r.
2. November: pigs at mast, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. v, fo. 7r.
3. May: tending sheep, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. v, fo. 5r.
4. Hens 'like ours at home, red in colour', British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. v, fo. 79r.
5. Sheep, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. v, fo. 78v.

6a. Fenland: Highland cattle and Konik ponies graze on Baker's Fen, part of Wicken Fen Nature Reserve, Cambridgeshire.
6b. Saltmarsh: Herdwick sheep on the saltmarsh of Morecambe Bay, Lancashire.

7. Heathland: Exmoor ponies on Sutton Heath, Suffolk.
8. Wood pasture: Browsing at Burnham Beeches and Stoke Row Nature Reserve.

# List of Figures


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2.1 | August: harvesting, British Library, Cotton Julius A. vi, fo. 6v. | 22 |
| 2.2 | Grains of spelt(left) and bread wheat. | 23 |
| 2.3 | Grains of hulled and naked barley. | 26 |
| 3.1 | March: digging and sowing, British Library, Cotton Julius A. vi, fo. 4r. | 42 |
| 3.2 | January: ploughing and sowing, British Library, Cotton Julius A. vi, fo. 3r. | 42 |
| 3.3 | An ard, or scratch plough. | 45 |
| 3.4 | A mouldboard plough, with coulter and wheels. | 45 |
| 3.5 | Ard from the Harley Psalter, British Library, Harley 603, fo. 21r. | 48 |
| 3.6 | A nineteenth-century plough. | 49 |
| 3.7 | The formation of ridge and furrow. | 56 |
| 3.8 | Abraham scaring birds, British Library, Cotton Claudius B. iv, fo. 26v. | 60 |
| 3.9 | December: threshing, British Library, Cotton Julius A. vi, fo. 8v. | 64 |
| 3.10 | Furlongs and strips in an open field. | 71 |
| 4.1 | Donkeys from the Old English Hexateuch, British Library, Cotton Claudius B. iv, fo. 49v. | 84 |
| 4.2 | Cattle from the Old English Hexateuch, British Library, Cotton Claudius B. iv, fo. 49v. | 90 |
| 4.3 | May: tending sheep, British Library, Cotton Julius A. vi, fo. 5r. | 94 |
| 4.4 | Sheep from the Old English Hexateuch, British Library, Cotton Claudius B. iv, fo. 49r. | 94 |
| 4.5 | Goats from the Old English Hexateuch, British Library, Cotton Claudius B. iv, fo. 49r. | 96 |
| 4.6 | September: hunting and pigs at mast, British Library, Cotton Julius A. vi, fo. 7r. | 98 |
| 5.1 | Oxen pulling carts (partly redrawn) from the Old English Hexateuch, British Library, Cotton Claudius B. iv, fo. 67r. | 109 |
| 5.2 | July: mowing, British Library, Cotton Julius A. vi, fo. 6r. | 125 |
| 6.1 | Collaton, South Hams, Devon. | 140 |
| 6.2 | Kentish droveways and lathes. | 145 |
| 6.3 | Smear Ridge (now Smeardon Down), Peter Tavy, Devon. | 150 |
| 6.4 | Crop-marks showing ‘Butterwick-type enclosures’ on the Yorkshire Wolds. | 152 |
| 7.1 | Cattle grazing on Rainham Marshes. | 163 |
| 7.2 | Old English settlement names on the north bank of the Thames. | 166–7 |
| 7.3 | Mucking, Essex: animal-related finds. a: Clay loom-weight ‘marked possibly to denote its place on the loom, or as a mark of ownership’. b: Iron shears.c: Excavated site. | 168–9 |

7.4 Pasture resources in the Mucking area. 171
7.5 The 'parallel parishes' on the north bank of the Thames. 174
7.6 Old English settlement names on Wallasea and Foulness Islands, Essex. 176
7.7 Mainland parishes' grazing rights on Wallasea, represented by detached portions. 181
7.8 Severn shore with fish weirs. 184
7.9 Wood-weaving products. a: Rough fencing sketched by Thomas Gainsborough. b: Fence-lines. c: Hurdle. 190–2
7.10 Hudda's *healh*, near Tidenham. 195
8.1 Woodland and arable. 200
8.2 Old English place-names in north-west Essex. 207
9.1 Burderop Down, near Swindon, Wiltshire. 222
9.2 Marlborough Downs showing archaeological features. 225
9.3 Chalton, Hampshire. 230
9.4 Wine's farm near Cheriton, Hampshire. 234
10.1 Yadsworthy Farm, Devon. 240
10.2 Reave systems on Dartmoor 243
10.3 Cada's *worðig*, now Lower Cadworthy on the edge of Wigford Down, Cadover Bridge, Devon. a: Traces of earlier land-use. b: Air photograph. 247
10.4 Access to the moor from long-distance and short-distance droveways. 250
10.5 'Lobed enclosures' at Holne Moor, Dartmoor. 254
11.1 Some Scandinavian place-names in the soke of Greetham, Lincolnshire. 260
12.1 Field boundaries at Bosigran, Cornwall. 273
12.2 Strip fields within an enclosure on Brown Willy, Bodmin Moor, Cornwall. 276
12.3 Early enclosure at Wheldrake, Yorkshire ER. 281
12.4 Arable strips at Wharram Percy, Yorkshire ER. 288

# List of Tables

2.1 ‘Wheat’ place-names. 25
2.2 ‘Barley’ place-names. 28
2.3 ‘Rye’ place-names. 31
3.1 Anglo-Saxon illustrations of ploughs. 47

# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ASC | Anglo-Saxon Chronicle |
| *ASE* | *Anglo-Saxon England* |
| CBA | Council for British Archaeology |
| DB | Domesday Book |
| EETS SS | Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series |
| *EHR* | *English Historical Review* |
| ER | East Riding (Yorkshire) |
| MGH | Monumenta Germaniae historica |
| NR | North Riding (Yorkshire) |
| NS | new series |
| ODan | Old Danish |
| OE | Old English |
| *OED* | *Oxford English Dictionary* |
| ON | Old Norse |
| OScand | Old Scandinavian |
| S | Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*: all charters are cited by Sawyer number, either from the original publication, or from the revised online version <http://www.esawyer.org> |
| *s.a.* | *sub anno* |
| *s.v.* | *sub verbo* |
| WR | West Riding (Yorkshire) |

# Note on Periodization

Unless otherwise stated:
early Anglo-Saxon = fifth to seventh centuries,
middle Anglo-Saxon = eighth and ninth centuries,
late Anglo-Saxon = tenth and eleventh centuries.

For reigns of individual kings, see Simon Keynes, 'Appendix I: Rulers of the English, c. 450–1066', in M. Lapidge, J. Blair, S. Keynes, and D. Scragg (eds), *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd edn (Chichester, 2014), 521–38.

# 1

# Introduction

Without Anglo-Saxon farming, the rest of English history would not have happened. The very earliest Germanic settlers in Britain had to provide themselves with food, as have subsequent generations in England ever since. The 'great men' of history, whether they built empires or composed masterpieces, could have done none of it if they hadn't had enough to eat. Their achievements have been celebrated in historical scholarship for centuries, but the people who produced the food have received much less attention. The vast majority of the population, in England as elsewhere, have been dependent until very recently on their own physical labour to ensure their supplies of food. This book, then, is about that most fundamental human activity, the provision of food, at the time when England's society, culture, and economy were coming into being.

Farming is usually counted as part of the economy: it produces wealth in its most basic form. While a good deal has been written about the early medieval economy in recent years, most of it has concentrated on the growth of trade and towns.[1] Agriculture has largely been taken for granted as the background against which commerce developed. In this book we attempt to illuminate that background by examining Anglo-Saxon farming as it worked at the most basic level: how did the 'average Anglo-Saxon' provide their household with food and other necessities, as well as producing a surplus to support those who did not feed themselves: the aristocracy, the Church, and, by the end of our period, a growing urban population?

In Part I of this book, we investigate the crops and livestock produced by Anglo-Saxon farming, and the tools and techniques used to produce them. In Part II, we explore in a series of landscape studies how these practicalities worked on the ground in different kinds of terrain. Our conclusions bring these two approaches together to provide a broad picture of Anglo-Saxon farming as a whole that is wide-ranging and comprehensive, as well as grounded firmly in detailed evidence. Apart from this chapter and the conclusions, we have not

[1] Naismith, *Money and Power*, is just one of many excellent books on the Anglo-Saxon economy that do not deal with production. Of the two recent blockbusters on the early medieval economy, McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, hardly looks at production at all, while Wickham, *Framing the Middle Ages*, does not 'drill down' to the basic practical level that concerns us here.

written any part of the book together, although we have each read every word the other has written: Debby Banham is responsible for Part I and Rosamond Faith for Part II. We have written in the first instance for our own pleasure, jointly and separately, as we discovered more and more about Anglo-Saxon farming, but we have always kept our readers in mind as we wrote. We imagine that most of our readers will either know about Anglo-Saxon England, but not about farming, or about farming, but not about our period. For the latter, we have provided a brief note on periodization (p. xv), and recommend the general books on Anglo-Saxon England listed in the bibliography, and for the former, a visit to a working farm will elucidate a great deal. For all our readers, we have provided a glossary of terms which seem to us to need explanation.

## A FARMER'S VIEW OF ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

The vast majority of Anglo-Saxons were involved in farming. Agriculture formed the bulk of the economy: manufacturing as we know it hardly existed, and by our standards trade played a minor, if growing, role. Most forms of wealth, and many interactions between individuals or groups, were concerned with what we would consider to be farming matters. Theft, for instance, in Anglo-Saxon law is primarily theft of cattle. Commercial transactions are mostly concerned with livestock too. Rents, tithes, and probably many taxes were paid in foodstuffs. For the basic necessities of life—food, clothes, and shelter—Anglo-Saxon England was self-sufficient, and this was also true of virtually all individual Anglo-Saxons. The average Anglo-Saxon was a peasant, that is to say, the majority of people grew most of what they ate, and ate most of what they grew.[2] Even those at the top of the social scale, although they garnished their lifestyle with imported exotica such as spices and silks, relied for the basics on their own lands, from which they extracted products via food rents and other obligations. For the average Anglo-Saxon, staying alive depended on his or her own physical work, tilling the soil, and caring for livestock. People lived on their arable crops, enlivened by whatever animal foods could be produced, clothing came from the backs of their own sheep, and roofing and bedding materials from the fields. This book shows how Anglo-Saxons went about ensuring their own survival, producing their own food, clothing, and, to some extent, shelter.

Anglo-Saxon farmers were not living in an egalitarian society. As far as Anglo-Saxon political theory is concerned, society was divided into a simple two-tier hierarchy, *eorl and ceorl*, even though reality must have been more complex. On the one hand was an elite distinguished by birth, wealth, and, for

[2] Although Anglo-Saxon peasants were at the lower end of the social scale, we use the term to describe their economic *modus operandi*, not as a sociological category.

the men, office as *eorl*. On the other were all other free men, *ceorl*s; most were farmers in one way or another, what King Alfred called 'people who work', an essential pillar of society alongside those who fight and those who pray. Most farmers were *ceorl*s, but a good deal of the work of Anglo-Saxon farming must have been done by slaves.[3] The reader should bear in mind that, while our sources present society in masculine terms, we believe that, as always, women played a vital role in the rural economy. Free status gave the *ceorl* the obligations of paying tax, doing military service and so on, but also the right (and obligation) to participate in the public courts. But free status did not stop a *ceorl* being a peasant.

By the time of our earliest evidence in the seventh century, powerful people from the king down had rights over the land and the people who lived there. Their position entitled them to be supported by deliveries of goods and services, including food rents (OE *feorm*), from their estates.[4] The liability to supply these rested on peasant families who had a hide of land, or some fraction of it, so it was essentially an appropriation of peasant agricultural surplus.[5] Landowners might also establish an 'inland', an area generally near their central dwelling worked by slaves and very dependent labourers.[6] This is very much the situation described in the *Rectitudines* (see p. 8). But outside these inlands, substantial farmers had more in common with their socially more elevated neighbours. Farming was fundamental to the way Anglo-Saxon society was held together.

How did the world look to these farmers? The chapters that follow give examples of their capacity to initiate change. Yet they may often have remained reluctant to do so, whether because they had to take into account the interests of neighbours and kin, or simply because they were risk-averse. Thus 'progress', whether that meant adopting new tools or ways of doing things, might have taken generations to take hold, even within a restricted neighbourhood. To individual farmers, as a result, the world might look quite stable, even if particular changes intruded on their life and work. Nonetheless, farmers and farming must have been seriously affected by the dramatic events in Anglo-Saxon history. We do not know, for instance, how much of the population survived in areas taken over by Vikings, or how much reorganization was needed as a result. Major disasters caused by war and invasion are not the subject of this book, but must be borne in mind.

One change, if less dramatic than invasion, certainly did affect Anglo-Saxon farming. Even today, farmers are notoriously, and rightly, concerned with the

[3] For slaves, see Pelteret, *Slavery*.

[4] Robin Fleming describes this 'ranked' society as one in which 'individuals are unable to divert an inordinate share of the material resources and labour of their communities towards their own or their families' uses': *Britain after Rome,* 65–75, at 65. A similar argument can be found in Faith, 'Forces and relations of production' and her *English Peasantry.*

[5] Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 284–6; for food rents, see Banham, 'Food plants'.

[6] Faith, *English Peasantry*, 15–88.

weather. The early Middle Ages was a period, like our own, when the climate was in transition. In sub-Roman Britain, deteriorating climate probably aided the collapse of the Roman lifestyle and large-scale cereal production, but by the end of our period, England was well on the way to the 'little optimum', or Medieval Warm Period that preceded the Little Ice Age.[7] Recent intensive research activity on climate change has revealed that temperatures in the eleventh century may have been as high as in the early twenty-first, with the amelioration beginning as early as the seventh.[8] As at the present day, there were climatic fluctuations, some probably quite violent. Exactly how these might have affected Anglo-Saxon farmers we cannot be sure, but the effects could have been quite traumatic, possibly including the famines recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The overall improvement, however, must have facilitated many of the changes discussed in this book.[9]

## SCOPE OF THIS STUDY

We have adopted a broad interpretation of the term 'Anglo-Saxon England', covering more or less the same area as modern England, and a period from around the beginning of the fifth century to the late eleventh. The term 'Anglo-Saxon' in this book usually covers anything or anybody within those territories and between those dates. It should not be taken as a 'racial' marker, unless it is explicitly contrasted with other ethnic terms such as 'British' or 'Scandinavian'. We do not normally use the term 'Anglo-Scandinavian' for later Anglo-Saxon England, but it should be remembered that its population was of mixed origin.

Our inclusive intention, both chronological and geographical, is, however, limited by the availability of information. Written sources only exist after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, and those that deal with farming belong almost exclusively to the tenth and especially the eleventh centuries (the seventh-century laws of Ine of Wessex being a welcome exception). Some of our most useful information comes from documents that are not even pre-Conquest: the greatest compendium of data on Anglo-Saxon farming is Domesday Book, compiled twenty years after the end of Anglo-Saxon England. Fortunately, other forms of evidence are more evenly distributed across the period. Archaeological remains are particularly full for the time, largely pre-Christian, when the Anglo-Saxons buried their dead with grave-goods. Settlement sites, too, go back to the earliest Anglo-Saxon times. Landscape and

[7] For the broad trends, see Dark, *Environment*.

[8] See Burroughs, *Climate Change*, 252–6.

[9] For a suggestion as to how this might have worked, see Banham, 'In the sweat of thy brow'.

place-name evidence, though often hard to date, is not confined to the end of the period. But taking all our evidence as a whole, there is no doubt that we suffer from a bias towards the late Anglo-Saxon period, and earlier centuries are more difficult to penetrate.

Nor is the geographic spread of our information uniform: written evidence is much more abundant from the south of England than from the north (apart from the Venerable Bede). There are several reasons for this: the south and east were always the most prosperous parts of England, the dynasty that eventually ruled England came from the south, and the Vikings were more active in the north and east. Archaeological evidence has tended to cluster around universities and excavation units, but developer-funded excavation has also been more intensive in the south and east. Place-names and landscape evidence are fortunately immune from most of these problems, and of course securely located. Landscape history too is less affected by southern bias, but even so, our book, we have to admit, is stronger on the south of England and the West Country, than it is on the Northern counties.

We have not tried to simply 'push back into the Anglo-Saxon period' phenomena with which we are already familiar from the twelfth century onwards, or even later periods,[10] but to evaluate early medieval English farming as we found it. We have tried to avoid the implication that pre-industrial farming was 'timeless' and unchanging; indeed, our findings are concerned with change as much as with stability. We hope we have kept our minds open to the unexpected, as well as to practices that had a long afterlife. Our preconceptions have no doubt influenced our thinking more than we realize (other people's are always easier to see than one's own), but we have at least allowed for those we were aware of.

The term 'farming' is also interpreted broadly, to include both arable and pastoral operations. We deal mainly with food production, but also with that of textiles, especially wool, and also, to a much lesser extent, of building materials such as thatch. We have excluded horticulture and viticulture, and also forestry, which produced the major structural material, timber, but we have dealt with some woodland products used in farming, for instance as fencing and folds. Our focus is mainly on practicalities, but these are impossible to divorce completely from the organization of agrarian production, or indeed from the trade in agricultural products, especially in as far as it affects the ways they were produced. It is also hard to draw a line between production and processing, but we have concentrated on the former. Thus, cereal crops are pursued as far as the threshing floor, but not to the mill, still less the kneading trough. Dairy work is investigated to a greater extent, but mainly for what it reveals about how milk was produced in the first place. Generally speaking, we try not to stray too far off the farm and its resources. It has been well said that

[10] The phrase is from Dyer and Everson, 'The development of the study', 15.

a farmer is still farming when he goes to market, or even to the pub at lunchtime,[11] but we have not usually followed him or her.[12]

## EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP ON ANGLO-SAXON FARMING

Given the importance of agriculture in the Anglo-Saxon economy, it is perhaps surprising that a volume with a title such as *Anglo-Saxon Farming* does not already exist. With a few honourable exceptions, Anglo-Saxonists have been content to take this basic aspect of Anglo-Saxon England for granted and focus on the interests of the more powerful and educated sectors of society. Even those that do deal with farming are not concerned primarily with the practicalities. H. P. R. Finberg's chapter on 'Anglo-Saxon England to 1042', in his volume in the great *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, ranges widely over Anglo-Saxon social and economic, and even political, history, but gives surprisingly little information about how farming was done. H. E. Hallam's chapter in the following volume has a more practical orientation, but its focus is the very end of our period, drawing particularly on Domesday Book.[13] The Domesday evidence is explored in exhaustive detail in H. C. Darby's Domesday Geography series, and synthesized in his *Domesday England*, but by its nature it is not concerned primarily with farming activities.

Archaeologists have devoted more attention to Anglo-Saxon farming than historians. Its recent study really began with Peter Fowler's 'Farming in the Anglo-Saxon landscape' (1980), and his more recent *Farming in the First Millennium* deals with many of the same issues as we do. However, his book deliberately eschews cultural divisions within Britain, or within the time-frame, in order to avoid preconceptions about 'Roman', 'Celtic', or 'Germanic' ways of doing things. As a result, it emphasizes continuities and commonalities, and does not highlight phenomena that were more specific in time or place, or indeed culture. Our book may be seen as complementing Professor Fowler's by concentrating on the specific farming practices of Anglo-Saxon time, place, and culture.

Archaeologists' willingness to engage with matters agricultural has been assisted by the growth in the second half of the twentieth century of scientific techniques that extract ever more information from biological remains. Some recent site reports, such as Gill Hey's on Yarnton in Oxfordshire, the series of volumes on Flixborough in North Lincolnshire, and the final report on Wharram

[11] By Pryor, *Farmers in Prehistoric Britain*, 20.

[12] Generally speaking, we assume we are dealing with farming *households*, and do not take a view on the gender of persons carrying out the work we discuss, except where there is specific evidence for this.

[13] Hallam, 'England before the Conquest'.

Percy in Yorkshire have been particularly useful in this respect.[14] Synthetic studies have also appeared in greater numbers in recent years, including the work of Pam Crabtree and Naomi Sykes on animal bones, and the surveys of zooarchaeology, archaeobotany, and other relevant topics in the *Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*. All these have been extremely valuable to us.

Work on diet, by both archaeologists and historians, has also contributed to our knowledge. One of us began her research career in that area, and Ann Hagen has gathered a huge compendium of information, drawn from both archaeological and historical sources, in her *Second Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink*. More recently, we have drawn upon the studies produced by the Medieval Diet Group.[15]

The work of Della Hooke on charter bounds, culminating in her *Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England*, and more recently her *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, deserves special mention. We have drawn not only information but inspiration from her publications: she is one of the few scholars who have really investigated conditions on the ground in Anglo-Saxon England. Margaret Gelling's work on place-names, too, has long been essential to any study of the landscape, and took a new and even more productive approach in her collaboration with the geographer Ann Cole. Their identification of the 'language of landscape', the immensely subtle and precise vocabulary used for particular landscape features, while not specifically concerned with farming, offers a way of seeing the world through Anglo-Saxon eyes, of distinguishing the various kinds of hills or streams or roads they knew and used.

One aspect of Anglo-Saxon farming that has received a thorough scholarly examination in the past is the early development of open fields. The standard work, and still very readable, is the Orwins' *The Open Fields*, but their views on origins have long been superseded. Tom Williamson's *Shaping Medieval Landscapes* presents a more recent perspective, and summarizes the history of open-field scholarship. The volumes on Anglo-Saxon landscape edited by Nick Higham and Martin Ryan contain some current contributions to the debate. But if our book does nothing else, we hope it will convince readers that there was much more to Anglo-Saxon farming than open fields.

Two recent studies, Professor Williamson's *Environment, Society and Landscape* and Susan Oosthuizen's *Tradition and Transformation*, also emphasize the Anglo-Saxon period as the cradle of agrarian developments that were of major significance in the later Middle Ages. Both authors have done much to stimulate our thinking over the years, and we hope that readers will find it useful to place our closer focus alongside their large-scale narratives. As we were going to press, Mark McKerracher was writing up his Oxford DPhil

[14] Hey, *Yarnton: Saxon and Medieval*; Dobney, Jaques, Barrett, and Johnstone, *Farmers, Monks and Aristocrats*.

[15] Woolgar, Serjeantson, and Waldron, *Food in Medieval England*.

thesis on agrarian change in mid-Anglo-Saxon England.[16] We are extremely gratified to see a young scholar investigating a topic so close to our own concerns. Perhaps Anglo-Saxon farming's time has come at last.

## PRIMARY WRITTEN SOURCES

One of the reasons there has not been more work on Anglo-Saxon farming is undoubtedly the paucity of primary written evidence on the subject. Anglo-Saxon writers cannot be said to have taken a huge interest in how their food and other necessities were produced. Thus we have drawn, on a wide range of sources whose primary concerns are not necessarily very close to ours.

### *The estate management literature*

The Anglo-Saxon estate management literature is not really a unified genre: it consists of two fairly theoretical prescriptive texts and one set of pretty informal records, all in Old English. The first two, the *Rectitudines singularum personarum* ('Rights of different people') and *Be gesceadwisan gerefan* ('On the prudent reeve', usually known simply as *Gerefa*),[17] appear together in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 383, but they probably have separate origins.[18] The *Rectitudines* lists, as its title implies, the rights and responsibilities of persons of different ranks, ranging from a thegn down to unfree peasants. The context in which these people and their relationships are envisaged is a rural estate, and thus many of their rights and responsibilities involve agricultural work and products. A number of them are specialist workers, such as shepherds and beekeepers, so the description of their duties gives useful detail. The *Gerefa*, on the other hand, is a handbook for a reeve or steward, listing the equipment he is responsible for and the work he must oversee at each season, as well as warning him repeatedly to put his employer's interests before those of the people subject to him. Doubts have been expressed about the *Gerefa*'s relationship to practical farming, chiefly because it clearly lifts batches of words from glossaries and other texts. It certainly needs to be used with caution, if only because much of its vocabulary is otherwise unknown. It was probably attached to the *Rectitudines* to supply a perceived gap in that text, which does not list a reeve among its *personae*.

The 'Ely Farming Memoranda'[19] consist of notes, jotted down at different times in the eleventh century, about goods, mostly agricultural, and money sent

[16] McKerracher, 'Agricultural Development in Mid Saxon England.'

[17] Both edited by Liebermann, *Gesetze*, i, 444–53 and 453–5.

[18] For the possible origins and purposes of the texts, see Harvey, '*Rectitudines singularum personarum* and *Gerefa*'.

[19] Edited by Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, 252–6 (Appendix 2, no. 9).

from the refounded abbey at Ely to that at Thorney, as well as lists of livestock (including people) at Ely properties, and of rents owed in eels. They are practically unique as genuine Anglo-Saxon ephemera, intended no doubt to be kept for as long as the information had practical use, but not expected to have lasting value. The mention of money gives a rare insight into the market in agricultural commodities, which was probably only beginning to develop at the end of the period.

### *Laws*

The *Rectitudines* and *Gerefa* are regarded as 'quasi-legal' texts, concerned as they are with custom, and found in a legal manuscript. CCCC 383 also contains the *Dunsætan* ('hill-dwellers'), an agreement between English and Welsh population groups living either side of a river and concerned chiefly with tracking cattle. The text is conventionally dated to the reign of Æthelstan (924–39), but only because it lists livestock values similar to those in the London trade regulations of that time.

Royal legislation from Anglo-Saxon England is much less concerned with agriculture. The law-code of Ine of Wessex (AD ?688 × 694)[20] concerns itself more with farming than any other Anglo-Saxon code, even the earliest ones from Kent, but it still leaves the vast majority of agrarian activities and concerns unlegislated for. This is in stark contrast with the early Irish law-codes which provided the basis for Fergus Kelly's magisterial study, or the Scandinavian ones examined by Annette Hoff.[21] The implication is that the Anglo-Saxon upper classes, especially later in the period, took a good deal less interest in how their lands were cultivated than their Irish or Scandinavian counterparts. Most Anglo-Saxon law-codes get no closer to the nitty-gritty of food production than cattle-rustling, clearly of serious concern to great landowners as well as lesser people. The London trade regulations of Æthelstan's and Æthelred's reigns also give us a good deal of information about agrarian products, reminding us how rural a country England was, even at the end of our period.[22]

### *Charters*

Like their legislation, the diplomas issued by Anglo-Saxon kings do not particularly focus on farming. The parties to these grants were concerned with the legal control of territory, not with how it was to be cultivated. However, they

[20] Edited by Liebermann, *Gesetze*, i, 88–123.

[21] Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, Hoff, *Lov og landskab*.

[22] Æthelstan 6 and Æthelred 4, edited by Liebermann, *Gesetze*, i, 173–83 and 232–6 respectively. Derek Keene, who is editing the latter code for the Early English Laws project, would date it slightly later than Æthelred's reign.

were definitely interested in its boundaries, and it is usually in boundary clauses that Anglo-Saxon charters reveal information about crops, for instance, or the organization of land. As well as royal diplomas, the term 'charter' covers a more miscellaneous group of documents, often in Old English, such as gifts to ecclesiastical establishments, which may give more detail about crops and, especially, livestock.[23] Anglo-Saxon wills often list livestock, too, bequeathed either with landed property or separately.[24]

### *The literature of secular learning*

A wide range of texts, all in some sense a product of the schoolroom, tell us something about farming, from the Venerable Bede's great textbook *De temporum ratione* (primarily concerned with calculating the date of Easter but incidentally revealing details of early agriculture recorded in the Old English names for the months)[25] to Abbot Ælfric's *Colloquy*, in which his pupils learn Latin by playing the part of adults in various occupations.[26] Some of the surviving Latin–Old English glossaries also help with the semantics of agricultural vocabulary, which, being so sparsely attested, is often obscure.

### *Charms and medical texts*

Many surviving Anglo-Saxon charms concern farming in one way or another: there is a fair-sized group concerned with the loss or theft of livestock, including swarms of bees, a few dealing with veterinary medicine, and others intended to assure the success of arable operations, or the security of their products.[27] They attest to the implicit trust placed by Anglo-Saxon farmers (and others) in supernatural powers, which played a role analogous to that of 'science' at the present day. It has not been possible to do justice to that important topic in this book, but many of these texts also reveal practical details of Anglo-Saxon farming.

### *Narrative sources*

No Anglo-Saxon narrative source is concerned primarily, or even secondarily, with farming, but those that relate episodes from everyday life often reveal details that would otherwise be lost to us. The Lives of St Cuthbert are

[23] Most of these 'miscellaneous' texts are edited in Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, and Harmer, *Select English Historical Documents*.

[24] Whitelock (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Wills*.

[25] Edited by Jones, *Bedae opera didascalica*, ii.

[26] Edited by Garmonsway, *Ælfric's Colloquy*.

[27] Banham, 'The staff of life' and Hollis, 'Old English "cattle theft" charms'.

particularly rich in this respect,[28] and even the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, mainly concerned with kings and battles, lists famines and cattle-plagues among its events of national interest.

## ARCHAEOLOGY

The Anglo-Saxon period, or much of it, is a 'proto-historic' one, in which very limited areas of life were informed by literacy, and thus even the most hard-core historian has to engage with non-written sources of information. As will be apparent already, farming scarcely came into the orbit of literate culture, and much of our evidence in this book is drawn from material sources.

### *Biological remains*

Perhaps the most direct archaeological evidence for Anglo-Saxon farming comes from the remains of animals and plants themselves. Plants are represented by both pollen, the subject of a long tradition of scholarship, and macroscopic remains, mainly seeds, only studied more recently, mainly since the nineteen-sixties. Since that time, plant remains have also been used to study human activity, not just the natural environment. We usually assume that seeds found on settlements arrived there to be eaten, although we can only be sure they formed part of the inhabitants' diet if they have actually passed through the digestive system. We also assume they were grown nearby, unless they are clearly imported exotica. One way or the other, plant remains on settlement sites, or in burials, are part of culture, not nature.

The same applies to archaeological animal bone, which has been found from a larger number of sites. In this case, there are often enough bones to answer a wider range of questions. What ages were the animals when they died? Were there more males or females? Were they processed on the site? Were only the parts to be eaten brought to the settlement? Did the size or shape of the animals change over time, or differ from those at other sites? Comparison between different sites allow us to make generalizations about Anglo-Saxon England as a whole, as well as identifying change through time and sometimes regional variation.

### *Artefacts*

Few of the tools used in Anglo-Saxon farming survive in archaeology, mainly because most of them were made of wood. A few such items were discussed by

[28] Edited by Colgrave, *Two Lives of St Cuthbert*.

Carole Morris in her two major compendia.[29] The iron parts of tools might be expected to be found more widely, but iron corrodes rapidly in the soil. Iron was also probably too valuable a material to be wasted and thus most of it would be recycled into further tools, weapons, or fittings. Nevertheless, a few ploughshares and coulters, for instance, do exist from the period, with the recent find of the latter from Lyminge of particular interest. Textile tools also supply information about wool production. Those tools that do survive are all the more valuable for their rarity, and may not survive by accident. They may be particularly significant items, deposited ceremonially for their symbolic value.

### *Landscape*

For Part II of our book, the main source of information is the landscape itself. The way it has been used by previous generations has left a permanent impact on the countryside of the present day, sometimes changing its entire character in ways that are obvious to even the casual observer. But in many cases the marks are much more subtle, apparent only to the experienced eye. Indeed, it is not just the eye, but the whole body, that needs to experience the landscape in order to understand it. There is no substitute for close observation, and also for walking—and sometimes clambering—across a place, if one is to discover how it has been used in the past. It is perhaps unrealistic to expect that modern people can see the landscape as Anglo-Saxons did, but experiencing that landscape directly is our best hope of doing so.

Having said that, there is obviously a good deal of information to be derived from maps, especially old ones that show the landscape as it was before the major changes of the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. Even modern ones can reveal patterns that are not apparent from the ground, and electronic mapping techniques offer even greater opportunities.

## PLACE-NAMES AND LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE

Place-names can tell us a great deal about the character of different environments, land use, crops, and livestock management. ‘Minor’ names, such as field-names, especially, can help reveal the resources available to communities and individual farms. Perhaps surprisingly, place-names have enabled us to identify and visit farms whose buildings and fields have long disappeared but whose Anglo-Saxon names have survived. The etymology of words in the general language can also be revealing: the word ‘barn’, for instance, often meaning no more than a big shed at the present day, not even necessarily used to store grain, is etymologically a *bere-ern*, ‘barley building’, and points to the

[29] ‘Anglo-Saxon and Medieval Woodworking Crafts’, and *Craft, Industry and Everyday Life*.

much greater importance of barley in the early Anglo-Saxon period, in particular, than at the present day.

## PRACTICAL FARMING EXPERIENCE

An invaluable source of information is the knowledge of those who work with traditional types of crops and livestock. These are not just traditional farmers—indeed, for crops, such traditional knowledge is all but lost—but also people working with plants and animals in new ways and for new purposes. The managers of native-breed sheep, pigs, and cattle, now used for conservation on marshland, wet meadow, high fells, and mountains, have a lot to tell us about the behaviour and diet of animals on traditional unimproved grazing. Clearly, Anglo-Saxon animals were not exactly like these 'traditional native breeds', but they shared important characteristics with them, including the ability to survive, and even thrive, in environments unsuitable for modern breeds. Similarly, experiments in growing types of cereals long considered 'obsolete' by commercial farmers yield information about how such crops grew, and how they differed from modern ones: the despised 'hulled' cereals, for example are more resistant to pests and diseases than the supposedly superior free-threshing ones. This type of information, while it cannot tell us how Anglo-Saxons farmed, can help us to understand a kind of farming that used resources and techniques no longer considered 'viable'. 'Ask the fellows who cut the hay' was George Ewart Evans' advice to anyone who wanted to learn about the work of the countryside, and people working there today still have a store of practical knowledge that rarely finds its way into books.

## VISUAL EVIDENCE

Visual evidence consists, to all intents and purposes, of manuscript illustrations: the great variety of plant and animal motifs in Anglo-Saxon sculpture may be decorative, symbolic, or both, but they are not intended as accurate representations. The illustrations we have used come chiefly from calendar manuscripts and those containing biblical narratives. There are of course many problems with using these illustrations as historical evidence. The Harley Psalter (early eleventh century), which has many little farming scenes, is modelled on the Carolingian Utrecht Psalter, and the calendar pictures probably had a Continental exemplar, too, although it has not been identified.[30] However, the Harley illustrations depart from their exemplar in many details, which

[30] Catherine Karkov states that 'that model is now generally believed to have been Anglo-Saxon rather than Carolingian', but it is not clear why: 'Calendar illustrations in Anglo-Saxon England', 159.

may correspond to differences between Anglo-Saxon and Continental *realia*.[31] Thus we may be justified in using them as evidence for English equipment or practices. Even those illustrations which appear to be independent of Continental influence have to be interpreted with care: a biblical scene may show what the artist believed to be conditions in Palestine in Old Testament times, rather than Anglo-Saxon ones. Any manuscript is by definition made by an educated person, not personally involved in farming, and perhaps less familiar with real food production than with texts from far away. Nevertheless, these pictures do represent what some Anglo-Saxons thought farming looked like, and no Anglo-Saxon could be quite as cut off from the realities of rural production as most of us are today.

## COMPARATIVE EVIDENCE

Even combining every conceivable source of information from within Anglo-Saxon England, we cannot answer every question we should like to ask about the farming of the period. We are often driven outside our own time-frame and geographical area for insights. Aware of the dangers of assuming that all 'pre-industrial' farming is the same, we have tried to avoid indiscriminate comparisons, but information about shepherding customs in early modern Europe, for instance, can help to explain Anglo-Saxon ways of doing things that otherwise make little sense. Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has proved a particularly rich source of such comparative material, having been well documented by educated travellers, antiquarians, and agriculturalists before it abandoned traditional farming practices. With all the necessary caveats, ethnographic analogy can save the historian from many a pitfall.

## OUR APPROACH

As will be clear from the foregoing, we have drawn on a wide range of sources; this approach is characterized by Janken Myrdal, the Swedish historian of medieval agriculture, as 'source pluralism'.[32] This he distinguishes usefully from multi- or interdisciplinarity: although we draw on information from, for instance, archaeology and anthropology, we remain ourselves historians. Our training is historical, and so is our methodology. Like Myrdal himself, we do not have enough of the historian's traditional written source material to rely on it exclusively. Nor, we like to think, would we be so blinkered as to ignore other forms of evidence, even if we worked on a better documented period. Thus we

[31] Carver, 'Contemporary artefacts illustrated in late Saxon manuscripts'.

[32] 'Source pluralism and a package of methods: medieval tending of livestock as an example'.

hope to present as rounded a picture of Anglo-Saxon farming as possible, not confining ourselves to the restricted range of questions that can be answered from written evidence. Our aim is to bring to bear every available source of information, and let different kinds of evidence illuminate each other.

Nevertheless, the nature of our evidence means there will be many questions about Anglo-Saxon farming that we cannot answer definitively; inevitably there will be some gaps in our picture. One reason for such gaps is the social specificity of our written sources. All written sources of course come from the top of society; there is no evidence at all for literacy among the Anglo-Saxon peasantry, the people who actually did the farming. The sources for farming deal, most of them quite explicitly, with large complex estates, employing specialist workers and engaging in a market for agricultural commodities, at least to some extent. The operations of small farmers, doing all these jobs themselves, or with a small generalist workforce, may have differed in many ways, possibly quite significant ones. Some of these differences we may be able to work out, but others are likely to remain hidden from us. It is therefore important to remember that whatever evidence in these chapters comes from written sources may apply only to a minority of farming regimes.

But no one studying the early Middle Ages would refrain from asking a question about that period simply because they could not be sure of answering it: frequently, simply raising new questions is a way of creating knowledge. Even a partial or uncertain answer is better than no answer, and in what is in many respects a proto-historic, rather than a truly historic, period, often the best we can expect. Even if no real answer is forthcoming at all, light may at least be shed on related issues, or methodological insights may result. This is particularly true where, as so often in Anglo-Saxon history, we are trying to make the sources tell us about matters they were never intended to deal with. The Venerable Bede, for instance, despite the enormous range of subjects he wrote about, had little interest in agriculture. But farming formed the background to everything he did, like all Anglo-Saxons, and the alert historian can often pick up information let slip in passing by writers whose interests lay elsewhere.

Finally, it should be emphasized that, although our concern is explicitly with the 'nitty-gritty' of farming, this is not a 'how-to' book. Although there may be many advantages to Anglo-Saxon farming methods, compared with those in use at the present day, we are not recommending any particular practices. We cannot take responsibility for the success of anybody's crops, let alone the welfare of their livestock. For one thing, our sources often leave us frustratingly short of detail: should you sow your cereals in the spring, or the autumn? And for another, there can be no absolute certainty about the past, particularly a past as remote as the Anglo-Saxon period. Despite the years we have both put into this project, our information is still, at the end of it all, incomplete and often ambiguous.

# PART I

# 2

# Arable farming in Anglo-Saxon England

## I: The crops

'and the broad barley crop
and the white wheat crop
and all the fruits of the earth'[1]

Here in Part I of our book, we explore what Anglo-Saxon farmers did, and how they did it, building up a broad but detailed portrait of Anglo-Saxon farming in practice. All Anglo-Saxon farming systems must, in fact, have been integrated ones, in which livestock and arable farming were indispensable to each other: arable crops depended on the manure and labour of animals, which in turn fed on the products of the arable, as well as on land not being cropped for the time being. The balance between the two elements must have varied widely between different geographical areas, some upland districts, for instance, being only marginally suitable for cereal cultivation. Nonetheless, since there was no significant market in agricultural products during most of our period, nearly everyone was dependent on what their land could produce: Part II will explore these issues in relation to particular landscape regions. Large landlords might require some tenants to specialize in producing certain crops or animal products (perhaps giving rise to place-names denoting peas, sheep, and so on), but the tenants almost certainly had to produce whatever else they needed for their own subsistence as well. Such specialization would in any case be impossible on the holdings of smaller landlords, let alone on those of independent farmers. For most people, if you wanted to eat it, you had to produce it. Thus all Anglo-Saxon farming regimes, whether on small farms or large estates, would in modern terms come under the heading of 'mixed farming'.

For purposes of analysis, however, it is more manageable to consider the two parts of the system separately. This chapter and the next will therefore deal with agriculture in the strictest sense, the cultivation of arable fields and

[1] *Æcerbot* charm, in Dobbie (ed.), *Minor Poems*, 116–18, at 118.