

CHAPTER 3

OLD ENGLISH

The first period in the history of English is referred to by one of the following names: Old English, Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Celtic. However, the earlier two names are more popular and used more often. The history of English begins with the coming of the Anglo-Saxons from Europe to mainland Britain. This period is from AD 449 to AD 1066. These two dates signify two major invasions that changed the course of history. The Anglo-Saxons were fierce, war-like tribes from Europe and their invasion in 449 changed Celtic Britain into Germanic England. The Norman Conquest in AD 1066 resulted in the infusion of a large number of French words into the vocabulary of English from Europe to mainland Britain.

The relationships between the Celts and the invaders is difficult to describe accurately, but they seemed to have settled down side by side in more or less peaceful contact with the Anglo-Saxons and combined to produce seven kingdoms known as the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy. The leadership of these kingdoms gradually passed into the hands of the Saxons because of their better political understanding. The Celtic languages were not used for any purpose by them, neither did these languages influence the Saxons. Therefore only a handful of Celtic words exist today and most of them are names of places or rivers. Some of these better known are the following.

(Place Names)

Dover, Cumberland, Kent, London, York

(Names of Rivers)

Avon, Thames, Trent, Dee, Derwent.

Some traces of Britain's Celtic past are also preserved in the first syllable of the names of some towns and districts in present-day England. These are- Manchester, Winchester, Worcester, Gloucester, Lichfield, Salisbury and Exeter. Another class of Celtic words preserved in Modern English are words connected with religion or religious activities.

DIALECTS OF OLD ENGLISH

There is a clear line of descent from the speech of the Anglo-Saxons to Modern English in matters of sounds, vocabulary, grammar and spelling, but Old English was not a single uniform language. We can distinguish four dialects in Old English. They are Kentish, Northumbrian, Mercian and West Saxon. Thus, it can be said that Old English was dialectal. This is understandable because three different Anglo-Saxon tribes were involved and it was but natural that a variety in languages existed.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF OLD ENGLISH

Some features of OE make it very difficult to read and understand the texts of this period. The language looks different because of its alien spelling, unfamiliar vocabulary and a totally different grammatical structure. The writing system of OE is very different from what we find with today. When the Anglo-Saxons came to England they used a system of writing which was in use in the Northern and Western part of Europe. (present day Germany and Scandinavia). This writing system used the Runic alphabet. The Runic characters were composed of sharp straight lines without curves. Many of these letters are found on weapons; such as arrows, axes, knife –handles, swords ect. Some are to be seen in monuments, jewellery and caskets made of bones, but their messages are difficult to derive as most of them are generally symbolic.

After the 6th Century, the spread of Christianity led to the gradual use of the Roman script, as this was the writing of the Latin religious texts. The Roman alphabet adopted by the Anglo-Saxons passed through some variations before it reached its present shape in Modern English. The old Saxon forms were superseded by French characters and some new letters were added to the alphabet, such as Q, q, W, w, J, j after the Norman Conquest of AD 1066.

FOREIGN INFLUENCES ON OLD ENGLISH

The story of English is the story of repeated intrusions of foreign elements into the English vocabulary. From the earliest times the country had been subjected to successive aggressions by foreign invaders such as the Romans, French and Scandinavians. Earlier they brought their own languages, but later bestowed on English a fair share of their vocabulary. In the OE period the two major influences were Latin and Scandinavian.

LATIN INFLUENCE ON OLD ENGLISH

Perhaps no single language has influenced English as much as Latin. Words in Latin existed in England before the coming of the Anglo-Saxons. In ancient times Latin had the status of a world language. The languages of some European countries which had come under Roman rule had become Romanised (e.g. Gaulish became French). However, this process of Romanisation was halted by the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, and the collapse of the Roman Empire. Most of the borrowed words in Latin relate to the areas in which the supremacy of the Romans was recognized, that is Military, Agriculture and Trade and Commerce. Some examples are: wall (from Latin Vallum), tile (from Latin Tequila), mile (from Latin Milia Passum), and many derivatives.

About AD 600 Christianity began to spread in England together with the rise of literacy. The Christian missionaries translated a large number of Latin texts (mostly in Northumbrian) and made word glosses. Many of the following words in existence today are borrowed from Latin and are related to religion; *heaven, hell, God, gospel, Easter, sin, alter, abbot, alms, angel, mass, nun, priest etc.* Other words relating to learning, science medicine are – *history, grammatical, master, paper, school, verse, meter, anchor, cucumber, lily, candle, plant, tiger* and so on.

SCANDINAVIAN INFLUENCE ON OLD ENGLISH

The second major linguistic invasion of English came as a result of the Scandinavian attacks on England. They were the Germanic inhabitants of Norway, Sweden and Denmark, who as one time neighbours of the Anglo-Saxons in 5th Century Europe, were closely related to them in blood and language. These daring sea-faring people were called Vikings. Viking Age from the middle of the 8th Century to the beginning of the 11th Century.

SCANDINAVIAN INFLUENCE ON OE VOCABULARY

The result of two centuries of close contact with the Scandinavians had an unavoidable effect on the languages of the Anglo-Saxons. This influence was not immediately apparent because of the hostile relationship between the Danes and the Anglo-Saxons. Towards the end of the 9th Century peaceful co-existence prevailed and many Danish words entering English which were very basic in nature. These words entered through everyday interaction some of these words are – *birth, bank, bull, call, clip, die, drag, egg, fellow, gap, give, get, guess, harbour, hit, hill, ill, kid, knife, leg, low, meek, muck, odd, race, raise, root, rotten, scare, score, seat, sister, sky, sly, tight, trust, want, weak, window.*

Apart from this, Scandinavian borrowings are found in family names and place names. It is interesting to notice that Scandinavian words were not restricted to nouns, verbs and adjectives. Structure words like prepositions and conjunctions and other forms such as pronouns and adverbs were freely borrowed. Three OE pronouns, **hie**, **hiera**, **him** were replaced by their Danish counterparts, **they**, **their**, **them**. Words like **both**, **same**, **aloft**, **seemly**, **to till**, **fro**, **though** are all Scandinavian in origin. But the most remarkable borrowing is ARE, the plural form of the most basic verb in English- 'to be'. Thus the Scandinavian influence on OE extended beyond the vocabulary to touch the grammatical system as well.

OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

The literature of the Anglo-Saxons is of two types. The first is that which was undoubtedly brought by the Germanic tribes when they invaded England and is preserved in the oral tradition. The second is manifest in the songs, poems and religious writings found in manuscripts produced when literacy came to England. Unfortunately, only a fragment of Old English poetry has survived and the manuscripts are the following:-

1. The BEOWULF (MS)
2. The JUNIUS (MS)
3. The EXETER BOOK
4. The VERCELLI BOOK

The golden period of Old English literature was the era of King Alfred. He was a scholar, soldier, law-giver and ruler. When he became king, there were not enough scholars to read the Latin service books and the early Christian literature. King Alfred brought in teachers and scholars from abroad and he himself set out to translate many of the works in Latin into West Saxon, including Bead's **HISTORY**. The most notable work inspired by Alfred was **The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle**. This book is the first book of English prose, and the first continuous history of a European nation in its own language

The year 1066 marks the end of Old English. The Norman Conquest made England into little more than a colony of France. French became the language of the king's court, justice, governance and education. The language of everyday speech among the upper class in England was French. The Normans had no interest in developing and patronizing a language such as English. In the absence of adequate patronage English literary writing almost came to a standstill. However, it continued to be the language of the masses. Over

a period of time, due to close interaction and inter-marriages, English began replacing French, first in the homes and later in the offices and schools. The children of the nobility spoke English as their mother tongue and had to be taught French in school. Thus the English Language survived the onslaught of the French rulers. Moreover, England was restored to English kings within 150 years of the Norman Conquest.

Exercises

1. Write T for true and F for false statements:

- a) Old English is known also as Anglo-Celtic English.
- b) Old English was a single uniform language.
- c) The Writing system of Old English is very different from what we find today.
- d) Scandinavian influence on the Old English vocabulary also affected the grammatical system.
- e) The era of King Alfred was very bad for English literature.

2. Answer very briefly:

1. What was the impact of the Norman Conquest on vocabulary of English?
2. Name the four dialects on Old English.
3. Write the features of the Runic characters (alphabet)
4. Name the two major influences on the Old English.
5. Name the four manuscripts of the Old English that have survived.

