

Documents in English History

Early Times to the Present

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Preface

The beginning student frequently assumes that history consists of the compilation of facts, the mere learning of which imparts knowledge and wisdom. With experience, however, he comes to the realization that the study of history is essentially a continuing process by which an individual historian asks questions of the evidence he has at hand or can discover. Written history consists of the answers that various historians have arrived at and recorded. It varies according to the questions posed and the beliefs and prejudices of the historians asking the questions and searching for evidence. It is not surprising, therefore, that each generation must write its history anew—not only contemporary history but also that of all previous times. Definitive history is possible only for those historians who have given up the arduous task of seeking new answers to questions both old and new.

There is, nevertheless, a constant factor in history, a factor essential if historians are to be prevented from wandering off into the wilderness of their own imaginations. This factor is the evidence used by historians in answering the questions they have raised. A historian's evidence also provides a means by which other historians can judge the validity of his answers. This evidence is often called "documents." Originally, when the discipline of history was less sophisticated, a document was a written record, and historians believed that only written records could reveal the secrets of man's past action. In the absence of written documents it was assumed that history could not be written. Without written documents there was only the "prehistory" of a mysterious age populated by shadows and visited by lesser beings such as archeologists and anthropologists. However, historians have come to understand that evidence is simply where you find it, and it is worth whatever you can make out of it. Written records obviously remain valuable, but a discerning historian may have his questions answered by a careful examination of other evidence as

well—the workmanship of primitive craftsmen, the remains of a Roman city, or the layout of a medieval manor as revealed by a World War II aerial photograph. In using evidence of this kind, the historian may have to ask more subtle questions and accept more tentative answers, but the historical process is essentially the same. Thus evidence of any kind, once recognized and appropriated by a historian, becomes a historical document to be used again and again by himself and others in the same field.

No historian, not even the beginning undergraduate, can remain a passive spectator. Each must ask his own questions and then seek answers to them. At first he will be led to the written accounts of other historians. This approach, however, results in confusion: historical accounts often conflict with one another. Which historian is correct? At this point one should not become discouraged. Instead, one should recognize, in this confusion, frustration and, yes, even anger, the maturing of a historian. As one perseveres, he will be led back at first to the same documents or evidence used by previous historians and then, hopefully, even to new evidence. Along the way one asks his own questions and arrives at his own answers with the same caution and confidence as other historians.

Every historian, from the beginner to the most prominent, needs the assistance of others working in the same field; the task of historical research, with the whole world as evidence, is too immense for a single person. This collection of documents, of appropriated bits of evidence, will help the beginning student of English history in two ways.

1. It will make him aware of the different kinds of evidence available to him. Some evidence cannot be presented here: for instance, a packet of soil analyzed by an agronomist to determine the location of the pilings of a neolithic building, a long list of place-names used by a linguist in tracing the probable routes of the Anglo-Saxon invasions, or a motion picture from the 1920s used by a social historian. Nevertheless nonwritten documents like the Bayeux Tapestry, aerial photographs of medieval fields, and the prints of the famous eighteenth-century artist, William Hogarth, can be included and reveal the variety of historical documents. Most of this book consists of written documents, and this is justifiable, since the majority of historians still rely almost entirely on evidence in this form. Even here, however, we have indicated the numerous types of written documents. Chronicles, governmental records, speeches, diaries, poetry, and nursery rhymes are only examples of this variety.

2. These documents include many that are generally agreed to be among the most important to an understanding of English history. They

provide evidence that has been used and must continue to be used to answer the hardest and most persistent questions.

We have placed the documents in chronological order and have made no attempt to group them topically. Each document is a self-contained unit, sufficiently complete with its introduction to be understood and appreciated by itself. However, in writing the introductions we have been conscious of the place of each document in English history. The introductions provide a thread of continuity from one document to another, should the student choose to read several documents in succession.

Many people have given us help and encouragement in the preparation of this book. Patrick C. Lipscomb III, Brian C. Levack, and Stanford E. Lehmborg read the manuscript and offered suggestions for its improvement. C. Warren Hollister gave needed encouragement. Larry J. Holley, Robert Cain, and Charles Middleton provided invaluable assistance in obtaining documents. Joan Weldon typed the manuscript. Finally, Robert Paradine, now an editor of Pennsylvania State University Press, and Wayne Anderson, history and political science editor at Wiley, made preparation of this book for publication more fun than it might have been. We give thanks to all of these people, to our colleagues at Texas Tech University, and to our long-suffering wives and families.

Finally, let us welcome each new student to the study of English history. Our prejudices, which led us to study this subject and now lead us to invite others to do the same, are apparent but unabashed. For the students who are about to discover England and its history this book was written; to them it is dedicated.

*Brian L. Blakeley
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St. Adrian's Day, 1974

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Prehistoric Britain in Pictures

Prehistory, often defined as the account of events or conditions prior to written or recorded history, is necessarily dependent on the work of the archeologist. A careful search for and interpretation of the surviving artifacts of early man can reveal much about the nature of prehistoric societies. Archeologists have found in Britain simple stone tools dating from the Old Stone Age, some as old as half a million years. It is not, however, until the New Stone Age or about 3000 B.C. that men developed the social organization necessary to construct the monuments for which the early Britons are justly famous.

The best known of Britain's ancient monuments is, of course, Stonehenge, located on the Salisbury Plain in southern England. Stonehenge (Plate A) was built in several stages, being begun about 2100 B.C. and, after several remodelings, achieving its final form about 1450 B.C. Although today it is generally believed that the completed Stonehenge was used to compute the time of the year, uncertainty remains regarding its original purposes and the means by which it was constructed. Stonehenge and similar remains, nevertheless, stand as a reminder that these primitive peoples possessed definite religious beliefs, considerable wealth, and sophisticated political and social structures.

Near Stonehenge are several other impressive remains, many of them associated with the so-called Beaker People, who arrived in Britain about 1900 B.C. and were the heralds of the Bronze Age. They received their name from their practice of burying drinking cups with the dead. Their numerous, large burial mounds resemble cemeteries in many areas (Plate B). Silbury Hill (Plate C), 125 feet high and covering 5 acres, is the largest artificial mound in Europe. It apparently had a religious purpose, but what specifically it was for remains a mystery. Avebury (Plate D) is typical of the numerous stone circles found in southern England from the same period.

The Celts, who began arriving in England about 1000 B.C., were more warlike than the earlier inhabitants, possessing by 500 B.C. the iron weapons



PLATE A

Stonehenge (Cambridge University Collection, copyright reserved).



PLATE B

Prehistoric cemetery (Department of Antiquities, Ashmolean Museum).

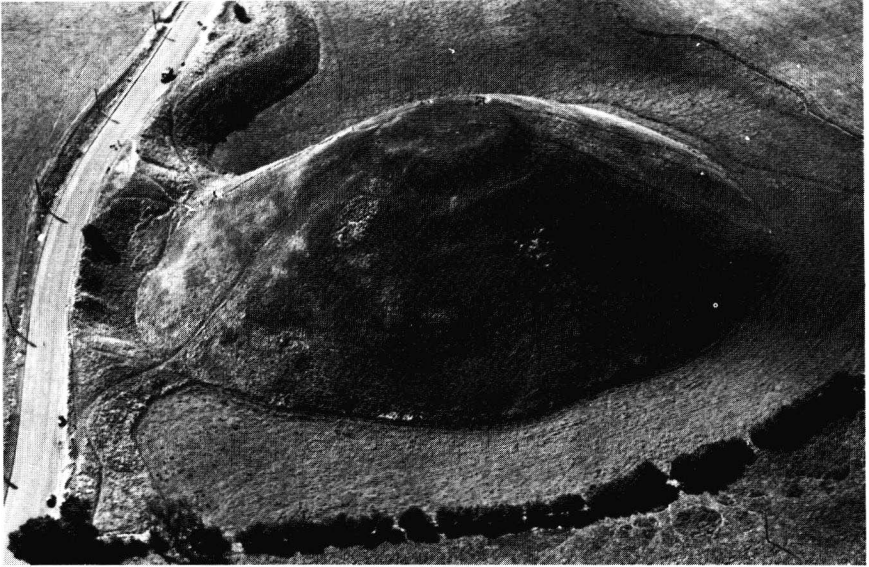


PLATE C

Silbury Hill (Crown copyright, reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office).



PLATE D

Avebury (Crown copyright, reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office).



PLATE E

Maiden Castle (Crown copyright, reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office).

that enabled them to conquer most of southern England. Their warlike nature and their stronger tribal government are reflected in their numerous hill forts, the most famous being Maiden Castle in Dorset (Plate E), enclosing

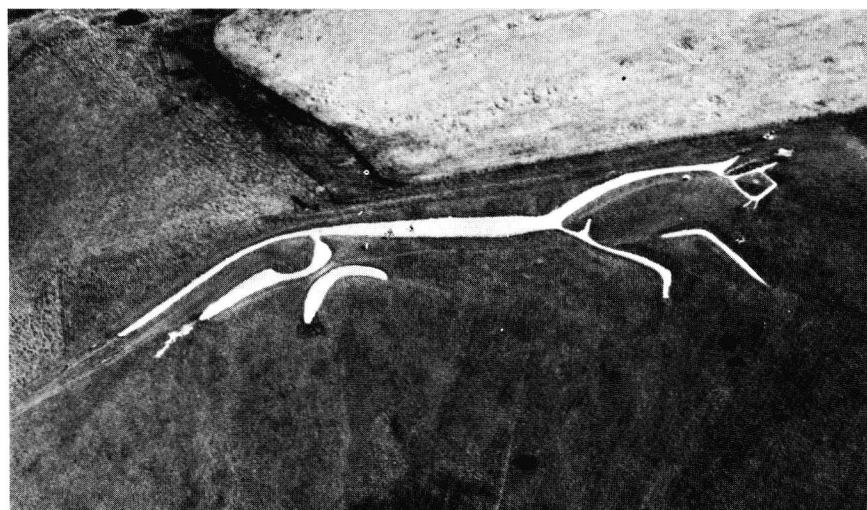


PLATE F

White Horse (Aerofilms Ltd.)

almost 45 acres of land. The Celts were also artists. Plate F, "White Horse," one of their greatest triumphs, is a figure of a horse 120 yards long cut into the side of a chalk hill.

Britain's prehistoric monuments are among her greatest national treasures. Today most of them are in the custody of, or are protected by, the Department of the Environment.

2

Tacitus *Agricola* (A. D. 98). Roman Britain, A. D. 78-84

Rome's subjugation of Britain, initiated by Julius Caesar in 55 B.C. and completed following the Claudian invasion of A.D. 43, frees the historian from the restrictions imposed by the absence of written evidence. It must be remembered, nevertheless, that to the Romans, Britain was always an expendable frontier province, an outpost of Roman civilization, and that, consequently, few Roman writers treated it in much detail.

Much of our detailed knowledge of Roman Britain comes from P. Cornelius Tacitus's *Agricola*, a brief biography of Gnaeus Iulius Agricola, the most significant governor of Roman Britain (A.D. 78-84). Tacitus not only dealt with Agricola's conquests and his policy of Romanization, but he also included a valuable description of the geography and the people of Britain, part of which is reproduced below.

As with any document, the *Agricola* should not be accepted uncritically. Tacitus was often careless of detail, and his statements must when possible be tested against other evidence, often that produced by the archeologist. More important, Tacitus was Agricola's son-in-law, and thus perhaps not the

SOURCE. Tacitus, *On Britain and Germany: A Translation of the "Agricola" and the "Germania,"* translated H. Mattingly (Penguin Classics, 1948), pp. 61-63, 70-72. Copyright © the Estate of H. Mattingly, 1948.