



Saxons and The Okehampton Area

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Note to readers:

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Finn Sproats

Saxon Okehampton

Okehampton is a Saxon town, so the following information helps describe the origins of the town.

Why did they choose this location?

Saxon villages were built in areas close to natural resources, so one main reason for Okehampton's placement is the river Okement running through it. In addition, surrounding the parish church was a dense forest – which would have been used to construct many houses and tools (many if not all of the residents relied on the land to survive).

The earliest written record of Okehampton (known then as Ocmundtune) is 980 AD. It was recorded as a place for slaves to be released at a crossroads, and make their own decisions)

What did Saxon Okehampton look like?

We can make many assumptions about the characteristics of the town due to the knowledge of that general era; however, information specific to Okehampton is limited.

We think the Saxon town grew around the Parish Church during Okehampton's earliest years. Today the town centre today is now over half a mile from the Parish Church. The All Saints evangelical church stood on a slightly raised hill and would have been surrounded by the villager's settlements. The church would presumably be wood like the rest of the structures in the settlement.

A traditional Saxon house is a hut like, timber structure with a thatched straw roof. These structures were not built to last; so many Saxon settlements are not visible today (although archaeological remains can be found). After the Norman invasion in 1066, and the construction of Okehampton Castle, the development of the town would have continued to eventually make what we see today, with the centre of the town in a new location separate from the Parish Church.

Erin Friend

Anglo-Saxon Churches

What did the typical Anglo-Saxon church look like?

An English church in the 7th century (during the Anglo-Saxon era) had 3 key architectural features:

1. **The Nave** – The largest, central area of a church, where services and prayer occur.
2. **The Chancel** – An area which was reserved for the clergy (the church's formal leaders) and the choir. It is usually separated from the Nave by some sort of screen or a set of stairs.
3. **The Porticus** – Latin for "porch", a small area in the church used for varying purposes such as chapels or burial-places. Anglo-Saxon churches would have 2 small porticus' opposite each other around the bottom of the chancel, meaning the architecture of the church would resemble the Latin Cross/Crucifix when observed from above.

Okehampton was founded by the Anglo-Saxons in 980AD – then known as "**Ocmundtune**". We are very lucky to have an authentic example of Anglo-Saxon architecture and culture by having the All Saints Parish Church, located on Church Path near Okehampton Primary School.

[All the following information was gathered from northmoorteam.org.uk].

The church has some very interesting history:

- The church (despite being rebuilt several times) has stood in the same place since its original creation in Anglo-Saxon times, presumably around the same time as the founding of Ocmundtune.
- It received consecration (when a church is declared as sacred) from Bishop Bronescombe in 1261.
- It was rebuilt again in 1447.
- In 1842, it was unfortunately almost entirely destroyed. The rebuild followed a very similar plan to the previous structure but was slightly enlarged. The church's magnificent 80ft granite tower luckily survived the fire and was incorporated into the rebuild. There are some remains of the original stone reredos (also known as the "altar piece" or "rood screen") that can be seen on the western wall of the southern aisle.
- The current reredos was crafted out of stone and are dated from 1891, whilst the altar rails and choir stalls are dated a year later from 1892.

These are some authentic photographs of All Saints church from 1890 (left) and 1904 (right), via [Francis Frith Collections](#).



The architecture of All Saints church is very similar to a typical Anglo-Saxon church, with its only stand-out differences being that it is slightly larger in length than most of its contemporaries. It has a tall, cuboid tower (Anglo-Saxon towers would usually be either cuboid or cylindrical) and two small porticoes to resemble the Latin Cross.

Why is All Saints Church so far away from the centre of town?

The Parish church may seem far in comparison to the other churches in Okehampton, but in the Anglo-Saxon times All Saints would have actually been around the centre of what used to be the village of Ocmundtune. The villagers would've lived in small timber huts nearby the church. Just as evidence of the early church is below ground so too are any remains of houses. This is why the large granite tower of All Saints church is some of the only evidence of Anglo-Saxon settlement in Okehampton due to its extremely durable structure.

Following the Norman Conquest of 1066, Okehampton expanded and developed on the flatter ground that has since been considered the town's "centre" – between the Parish Church and Okehampton Castle (built shortly after Norman Invasion). The flatter ground would have been more convenient for the town as a part of the medieval wool trade.

There are many churches in Okehampton, but All Saints is not only the oldest but is also the only one with Anglo-Saxon history and strong architectural influence. There are many more examples of Anglo-Saxon history in the churches of Devonshire, such as the nearby village of Belstone which features a granite cross dating back from somewhere between the 7th and 9th centuries (within the Anglo-Saxon era) in its Parish Church of St. Mary the Virgin. [Via belstonevillage.net]

Adam Hassan

Who were the Anglo-Saxons?

The Anglo-Saxons were migrants from northern Europe who settled in England in the fifth and sixth centuries. Initially comprising many small groups and divided into a number of kingdoms, the Anglo-Saxons were finally joined into a single political realm – the kingdom of England – during the reign of King Æthelstan (924–939). They remained the dominant political force until the last king of Anglo-Saxon England, Harold II, who was killed by the Normans at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and much of the quintessential Anglo-Saxon culture was demolished in a Norman plot to gain ultimate power of England. - <https://www.bl.uk/anglo-saxons/articles/who-were-the-anglo-saxons>

The town's names and their Saxon origins:

A name close to 'Okehampton' was used by the 10th century and means a place where slaves were freed at a crossroads. The main Saxon settlement grew up around the parish church, away from what is now the town centre. The Saxon naming came about after the Celtic language stopped being spoken due to the Saxons dominating the Celts. However, many place names kept their Celtic origin, so Okehampton is an anomaly in this respect as it was replaced by a Saxon name, derived from the town's river 'Okement', to create the name 'Okehampton'. - <https://www.britainexpress.com/attractions.htm?attraction=2824>

<https://johnhmoore.co.uk/hele/saxon.htm>

<http://www.witheridge-historical-archive.com/anglo-saxon.htm>

Anglo Saxon architecture remains:

St James' church in Jacobstowe was recently found to have ruins underneath its structures which suggest it dates back to much earlier than previously thought. The unearthing of the church has revealed the foundations for an apse below the contemporary church, which is a semi circular end to a building. Before Romans converted the Anglo Saxons to Christianity, they were pagans who may have worshipped deities instead of a monotheistic God. Historic texts reveal that apses in churches were used to worship deities, so this reveals that the foundations of the church in Jacobstowe are Anglo Saxon. It was built on top of by the Normans in their quest to invade Britain and flatten the Anglo Saxon culture, explaining why only ruins of the foundations of the apse remain. -

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<http://www.okehampton-today.co.uk/article.cfm?id=925&headline=Exciting%20new%20discovery%20at%20ancient%20church§ionIs=news&searchyear=2015>