



About Wessex

Wessex, the most powerful of the West Saxon kingdoms, was the largest, most powerful and most civilised of the Anglo-Saxon states. The British Royal Family is descended directly from the West Saxon Kings. The first of these was Cerdic who, with his son Cynric, landed with a war band from five ships at Southampton and defeated a native British king at Portchester in the year AD 495.

By 800, the four Anglo-Saxon kingdoms with power in England were Mercia, Northumberland, East Anglia and Wessex. Around that time 'Shires' were created in Wessex, the names of each referring to the towns on which the surrounding Shire was dependent. Thus:

- Dorset*, Dorchester - now the County of Dorset
- Wiltunscir*, Wilton - now the County of Wiltshire
- Somersaete*, Somerton - now the County of Somerset
- Hamtonscir*, Southampton - now the County of Hampshire

Other shires were created elsewhere in England as they became subject to the Kings of Wessex. Each was presided over by a bishop and a sheriff.

Wessex was the only Anglo-Saxon kingdom to survive the onslaught of the Vikings in the ninth century. Under Alfred the Great (871-899) ruling from Winchester, it became the centre for revival and the dominant force in the unification of England. It was this, even more than his victory over the Danes at Edington in 878, that marks him as one of the greatest figures in English history.

To protect his kingdom, he recognised the importance of professional soldiers and sea power, and ensured that Wessex had both. He developed a system of fortified burghs, garrisoned by full time, well-trained soldiers. These burghs became the earliest towns in the country. A strong believer that respect for law must be at the heart of a civilised society, he created a collection of laws that is seen today by many as the foundation of English law as we know it. He was also a learned man who played a major role in the development of the English language.

The Danes returned early in the eleventh century and Canute became King of England in 1016. He divided the country into four parts, each an earldom. Godwin was appointed the first Earl of Wessex with jurisdiction over all of England south of the Thames. Although there was to be another upheaval in 1066 with the Norman Conquest, the transfer of the capital of England from Winchester to London had already been made in 1042 and was never reversed. Thereafter the name of Wessex faded into the background.

The area, however, always remained important in the flow of English history. The concentration of heritage that Wessex now enjoys bears witness to this. At the end of the nineteenth century, the publication of Thomas Hardy's novels created a revival in the use of Wessex to describe the central part of southern England. Queen Elizabeth II also gave Wessex much increased prominence in 1999 on the occasion of the marriage of her third son, Edward, to Sophie Rhys-Jones whom she created Earl and Countess of Wessex.

The name Wessex is now used widely by such diverse entities as train operators, hotels and water suppliers, and more and more by all those who see themselves happily and profitably centred on this historic and extremely beautiful part of England.



The Wessex Wyvern is one of the oldest emblems in Europe. It was the emblem of Wessex and England until replaced by the cross of St. George after the Crusades.



- English Heritage
- National Trust
- Abbeys, Cathedrals, Priors
- Historic Houses
- Gardens
- Castles



Taken from original map by Alexander S. Graybill