

Alfred the Great, King of England

(My 35th great Grandfather)



King Aelfred (Alfred) was often considered the first King of England. Alfred was the fifth son of King Aethelwulf and his wife Osburh of the West Saxons (Wessex). Alfred was born in 849 in Wantage (in modern Berkshire). His father died in 858; his eldest brother, Aethelstan, was already dead and the next two brothers Aethelbald and Aethelberht, had short reigns. The fourth son, Aethelred I, succeeded in 865 the year of the great Danish invasion.

From around 870, armies made up of thousands of Viking raiders were raiding the coasts and rivers of England from their fast and efficient longships. Raids were giving way to the establishment of permanent Danish settlements. In 867, the Vikings set up a kingdom in York. They defeated the other main Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and this left Wessex alone when the Vikings attacked in 870.



The Wessex army was led by King Aethelred (Alfred's older brother) and Alfred. Despite having won some battles the Vikings were winning. A great reinforcement joined the Danes at Reading and here Aethelred died. Alfred thus became king at a critical juncture. Alfred was almost without allies, except Aethelnoth earldorman of Somerset and had few fighters – his royal bodyguard and a small army of thegns. He was forced to hide in the Somerset tidal marshes. He devised new tactics, partly based on his experience of the Danes fighting methods. He set up a fortified base at Athelney, from where he directed a guerilla campaign, with fighters from Wiltshire, Somerset and Hampshire.

In 875 he went to sea with a fleet which repelled seven ships and captured one. The Danes marched across Wessex in 876 but Alfred surrounded them and they swore they would leave Wessex; but they broke their oaths and occupied Exeter. Alfred pursued them and again they came to terms mainly because of storms that had destroyed their fleet.

At the battle of Edington in 878, his army defeated the Danes. The Vikings sought peace and Alfred sponsored King Guthrum's baptism. This baptism took place at Aller on the river Parret, Alfred standing as sponsor, and Guthrum stayed 12 days with the king at Wedmore (Somerset), where the ceremony of the unbinding of the chrism took place and the details of the treaty were

probably settled. This victory not only gave Alfred peace until 885 but ensured that the Danes never again overcame Wessex. In saving his own kingdom Alfred prevented England from becoming a Scandinavian country and retained a base from which the Danelaw (the area of Danish occupation) was later reconquered and Christianity re-established. He also built up a navy to fend off the continuing coast raids and equipped it with large ships built to his own design.

Alfred also carried out diplomatic measures to strength the likelihood that peace would last. He made alliances through marriage, including his own marriage to a Mercian and his daughter's to a Viking.

During his last years King Alfred reaped the benefits of his defensive measures. He organized the English levies to keep an army constantly in the field and established the burghal system to defend his kingdom with a ring of fortified center, regularly maintained and garrisoned.

He reorganized his finances and also the attendance of thegns (noble followers) at his court. Many of his pronouncements are not found in earlier legislation; the more important defined the rights of sanctuary, regulated and limited the blood feud, and imposed penalties for breach of oath and pledge, stressing especially the enormity of treason to one's lord.

A decay of Latin scholarship in England had set in before the Danish invasions, and these accelerated it. "To further his own studies and to raise the level of learning in his country by providing vernacular translations of "some books which may be most necessary for all men to know". Although these works were translated as part of an educational scheme, there is no doubt that Alfred him-self was keenly interested in their content and that he pondered deeply on the theological and philosophical problems which they raise.

(This figure is from the knob of a royal scepter of the ninth century, with a highly formalized representation of the great Saxon king.)



Alfred also caused children both of noble and of humble birth to be taught to read English and Latin at his court, and his preface to the *Cura pastoralis* outlined an education for the sons of all free men who could afford it; all were to learn to read English, and those destined for the church were to read Latin also. Alfred founded a nunnery and a monastery with John the Old Saxon as

its abbot. The sources show him as a deeply religious man, who regarded the government of his kingdom as a divine charge.

Alfred died on October 26, 899 and was buried at Winchester. Subsequent generations regarded him rightly as the savior of his people from the Danes and as a lawgiver; many of his administrative reforms were permanent, and his books continued to be copied and read throughout the Anglo-Saxon period and beyond it. Many legends grew up about him, and there seems to have been a continuous oral tradition concerning him.



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