Alfred the Great

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Alfred the Great (Old English: *Ælfrēd*, *Ælfrǣd*, "elf counsel" or "wise elf"; 849 – 26 October 899) was King of Wessex from 871 to 899.

Alfred successfully defended his kingdom against the Viking attempt at conquest, and by the time of his death had become the dominant ruler in England.[1] He is one of only two English monarchs to be given the epithet "the Great", the other being the Scandinavian Cnut the Great. He was also the first King of the West Saxons to style himself "King of the Anglo-Saxons". Details of Alfred's life are described in a work by the 10th-century Welsh scholar and bishop Asser.

Alfred had a reputation as a learned and merciful man of a gracious and level-headed nature who encouraged education, proposing that primary education be taught in English, and improved his kingdom's legal system, military structure and his people's quality of life. In 2002, Alfred was ranked number 14 in the BBC's poll of the 100 Greatest Britons.

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Statue of Alfred the Great by Hamo Thornycroft in Winchester, unveiled during the millenary commemoration of Alfred's death.

King of Wessex

Reign	23 April 871 – 26 October 899
Predecessor	Æthelred
Successor	Edward the Elder
Born	849 Wantage, then in Berkshire, now Oxfordshire
Died	26 October 899 (around 50) Winchester
Burial	c. 1100 Hyde Abbey, Winchester, Hampshire, now lost
Spouse	Ealhswith
Issue	Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians Edward, King of Wessex Æthelgifu, abbess of Shaftesbury Æthelweard of Wessex Ælfthryth, Countess of Flanders

Full name

Ælfred of Wessex

House	Wessex
Father	Æthelwulf, King of Wessex
Mother	Osburh
Religion	Roman Catholic

Childhood

Alfred was born in the village of Wanating, now Wantage, Oxfordshire. He was the youngest son of King Æthelwulf of Wessex by his first wife, Osburh.[a]

In 853, at the age of four, Alfred is reported by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to have been sent to Rome, where he was confirmed by Pope Leo IV, who "anointed him as king".[3] Victorian writers later interpreted this as an anticipatory coronation in preparation for his eventual succession to the throne of Wessex. This is unlikely; his succession could not have been foreseen at the time, as Alfred had three living elder brothers. A letter of Leo IV shows that Alfred was made a "consul"; a misinterpretation of this investiture, deliberate or accidental, could explain later confusion.[4] It may also be based on Alfred's later having accompanied his father on a pilgrimage to Rome, where he spent some time at the court of Charles the Bald, King of the Franks, around 854–855.

On their return from Rome in 856, Æthelwulf was deposed by his son Æthelbald. With civil war looming, the magnates of the realm met in council to hammer out a compromise. Æthelbald would retain the western shires (i.e. historical Wessex), and Æthelwulf would rule in the east. When King Æthelwulf died in 858, Wessex was ruled by three of Alfred's brothers in succession: Æthelbald, Æthelberht and Æthelred.[5]

Bishop Asser tells the story of how as a child Alfred won as a prize a book of Saxon poems, offered by his mother to the first of her children able to memorize it.[6] Legend also has it that the young Alfred spent time in Ireland seeking healing. Alfred was troubled by health problems throughout his life. It is thought that he may have suffered from Crohn's disease.[7] Statues of Alfred in Winchester and Wantage portray him as a great warrior. Evidence suggests he was not physically strong, and though not lacking in courage, he was noted more for his intellect than as a warlike character.[8]

Reigns of Alfred's brothers

During the short reigns of the older two of his three elder brothers, Æthelbald of Wessex and Æthelberht of Wessex, Alfred is not mentioned. An army of Danes which the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* described as the Great Heathen Army had landed in East Anglia with the intent of conquering the four kingdoms that constituted Anglo-Saxon England in 865.[9] It was with the backdrop of a rampaging Viking army that Alfred's public life began, with the accession of his third brother, Æthelred of Wessex, in 865.

During this period, Bishop Asser applied to Alfred the unique title of *secundarius*, which may indicate a position akin to that of the Celtic *tanist*, a recognised successor closely associated with the reigning monarch. This arrangement may have been sanctioned by Alfred's father, or by the Witan, to guard against the danger of a

disputed succession should Æthelred fall in battle. The arrangement of crowning a successor as royal prince and military commander is well known among other Germanic tribes, such as the Swedes and Franks, to whom the Anglo-Saxons were closely related.

Fighting the Viking invasion

In 868, Alfred is recorded as fighting beside Æthelred in an unsuccessful attempt to keep the Great Heathen Army, led by Ivar the Boneless, out of the adjoining Kingdom of Mercia.[10] At the end of 870, the Danes arrived in his homeland. The year which followed has been called "Alfred's year of battles". Nine engagements were fought, with varying outcomes, though the places and dates of two of these battles have not been recorded.

A map of the route taken by the Viking Great Heathen Army that arrived in England from Denmark, Norway and southern Sweden in 865.

In Berkshire, a successful skirmish at the Battle of Englefield on 31 December 870 was followed by a severe defeat at the siege and Battle of Reading by Ivar's brother Halfdan Ragnarsson on 5 January 871. Four days later, the Anglo-Saxons won a brilliant victory at the Battle of Ashdown on the Berkshire Downs, possibly near Compton or Aldworth. Alfred is particularly credited with the success of this last battle.[11]

Later that month, on 22 January, the Saxons were defeated at the Battle of Basing. They were defeated again on 22 March at the Battle of Merton (perhaps Marden in Wiltshire or Martin in Dorset).[11] Æthelred died shortly afterwards on 23 April.

King at war

Early struggles, defeat and flight

In April 871, King Æthelred died, and Alfred succeeded to the throne of Wessex and the burden of its defence, even though Æthelred left two under-age sons, Æthelhelm and Æthelwold. This was in accordance with the agreement that Æthelred and Alfred had made earlier that year in an assembly at *Swinbeorg*. The brothers had agreed that whichever of them outlived the other would inherit the personal property that King Æthelwulf had left jointly to his sons in his will. The deceased's sons would receive only whatever property and riches their father had settled upon them and whatever additional lands their uncle had acquired. The unstated premise was that the surviving brother would be king. Given the ongoing Danish invasion and the youth of his nephews, Alfred's accession probably went uncontested.

While he was busy with the burial ceremonies for his brother, the Danes defeated the Saxon army in his absence at an unnamed spot, and then again in his presence at Wilton in May.[11] The defeat at Wilton smashed any remaining hope that Alfred could drive the invaders from his kingdom. He was forced instead to make peace with them, according to sources that do not tell what the terms of the peace were. Bishop Asser claimed that the pagans agreed to vacate the realm and made good their promise.[12]

Indeed, the Viking army did withdraw from Reading in the autumn of 871 to take up winter quarters in Mercian London. Although not mentioned by Asser or by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Alfred probably also paid the Vikings cash to leave, much as the Mercians were to do in the following year.[12] Hoards dating to the Viking occupation of London in 871/2 have been excavated at Croydon, Gravesend, and Waterloo Bridge. These finds hint at the cost involved in making peace with the Vikings. For the next five years, the Danes occupied other parts of England.[13]

In 876 under their new leader, Guthrum, the Danes slipped past the Saxon army and attacked and occupied Wareham in Dorset. Alfred blockaded them but was unable to take Wareham by assault.[11] Accordingly, he negotiated a peace which involved an exchange of hostages and oaths, which the Danes swore on a "holy ring"[14] associated with the worship of Thor.[15] The Danes broke their word and, after killing all the hostages, slipped away under cover of night to Exeter in Devon.[16]

A Victorian portrayal of the 12th-century legend of Alfred burning the cakes

Alfred blockaded the Viking ships in Devon, and with a relief fleet having been scattered by a storm, the Danes were forced to submit. The Danes withdrew to Mercia. In January 878, the Danes made a sudden attack on Chippenham, a royal stronghold in which Alfred had been staying over Christmas, "and most of the people they killed, except the King Alfred, and he with a little band made his way by wood and swamp, and after Easter he made a fort at Athelney in the marshes of Somerset, and from that fort kept fighting against the foe".[17] From his fort at Athelney, an island in the marshes near North Petherton, Alfred was able to mount an effective resistance movement, rallying the local militias from Somerset, Wiltshire and Hampshire.[11]

A legend, originating from 12th century chronicles,[2] tells how when he first fled to the Somerset Levels, Alfred was given shelter by a peasant woman who, unaware of his identity, left him to watch some cakes she had left cooking on the fire. Preoccupied with the problems of his kingdom, Alfred accidentally let the cakes burn, and was roundly scolded by the woman upon her return.

878 was the low-water mark in the history of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. With all the other kingdoms having fallen to the Vikings, Wessex alone was still resisting.[18]

Counter-attack and victory

In the seventh week after Easter (4–10 May 878), around Whitsuntide, Alfred rode to 'Egbert's Stone' east of Selwood, where he was met by "all the people of Somerset and of Wiltshire and of that part of Hampshire which is on this side of the sea (that is, west of Southampton Water), and they rejoiced to see him".[17] Alfred's emergence from his marshland stronghold was part of a carefully planned offensive that entailed raising the fyrds of three shires. This meant not only that the king had retained the loyalty of ealdormen, royal reeves and king's thegns (who were charged with levying and leading these forces), but that they had maintained their positions of authority in these localities well enough to answer his summons to war. Alfred's actions also suggest a system of scouts and messengers.[19]

King Alfred's Tower (1772) on the supposed site of *Egbert's Stone*, the mustering place before the Battle of Edington.[b]

Alfred won a decisive victory in the ensuing Battle of Edington which may have been fought near Westbury, Wiltshire.[11] He then pursued the Danes to their stronghold at Chippenham and starved them into submission. One of the terms of the surrender was that Guthrum convert to Christianity. Three weeks later the Danish king and 29 of his chief men were baptised at Alfred's court at Aller, near Athelney, with Alfred receiving Guthrum as his spiritual son.[11]

According to Asser:

> The unbinding of the Chrisom [c] took place with great ceremony eight days later at the royal estate at Wedmore[21]

While at Wedmore Alfred and Guthrum negotiated what some historians have called the Treaty of Wedmore, but it was to be some years after the cessation of hostilities that a formal treaty was signed.[22] Under the terms of the so-called Treaty of Wedmore, the converted Guthrum was required to leave Wessex and return to East Anglia. Consequently, in 879 the Viking army left Chippenham and made its way to Cirencester. [21] The formal Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum, preserved in Old English in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (Manuscript 383), and in a Latin compilation known as *Quadripartitus*, was negotiated later, perhaps in 879 or 880, when King Ceolwulf II of Mercia was deposed.[23]

That treaty divided up the kingdom of Mercia. By its terms the boundary between Alfred's and Guthrum's kingdoms was to run up the River Thames, to the River Lea; follow the Lea to its source (near Luton); from there extend in a straight line to Bedford; and from Bedford follow the River Ouse to Watling Street.[24]

In other words, Alfred succeeded to Ceolwulf's kingdom, consisting of western Mercia; and Guthrum incorporated the eastern part of Mercia into an enlarged kingdom of East Anglia (henceforward known as the Danelaw). By terms of the treaty, moreover, Alfred was to have control over the Mercian city of London and its mints—at least for the time being.[25] The disposition of Essex, held by West Saxon kings since the days of Egbert, is unclear from the treaty, though, given Alfred's political and military superiority, it would have been surprising if he had conceded any disputed territory to his new godson.

Quiet years, restoration of London (880s)

With the signing of the Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum, an event most commonly held to have taken place around 880 when Guthrum's people began settling East Anglia, Guthrum was neutralised as a threat.[26] The Viking army, which had stayed at Fulham during the winter of 878-879, sailed for Ghent and was active on the continent from 879-892.[27][28]

A coin of Alfred, king of Wessex, London, 880 (based upon a Roman model).
Obv: King with royal band in profile, with legend: ÆLFRED REX "King Ælfred".

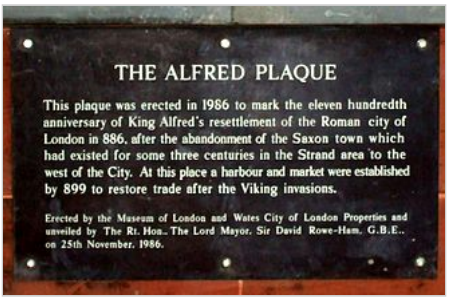
Alfred was still forced to contend with a number of Danish threats. A year later, in 881, Alfred fought a small sea battle against four Danish ships "on the high seas".[27] Two of the ships were destroyed and the others surrendered to Alfred's forces.[29] Similar small skirmishes with independent Viking raiders would have occurred for much of the period, as they had for decades.

In 883 — though there is some debate over the year — King Alfred, because of his support and his donation of alms to Rome, received a number of gifts from Pope Marinus.[30] Among these gifts was reputed to be a piece of the true cross, a true treasure for the devout Saxon king. According to Asser, because of Pope Marinus' friendship with King Alfred, the pope granted an exemption to any Anglo-Saxons residing within Rome from tax or tribute.[31]

After the signing of the treaty with Guthrum, Alfred was spared any large-scale conflicts for some time. Despite this relative peace, the king was still forced to deal with a number of Danish raids and incursions. Among these was a raid in Kent, an allied kingdom in South East England, during the year 885, which was quite possibly the largest raid since the battles with Guthrum. Asser's account of the raid places the Danish raiders at the Saxon city of Rochester,[27] where they built a temporary fortress in order to besiege the city. In response to this incursion, Alfred led an Anglo-Saxon force against the Danes who, instead of engaging the army of Wessex, fled to their beached ships and sailed to another part of Britain. The retreating Danish force supposedly left Britain the following summer.[32]

Not long after the failed Danish raid in Kent, Alfred dispatched his fleet to East Anglia. The purpose of this expedition is debated, though Asser claims that it was for the sake of plunder.[32] After travelling up the River Stour, the fleet was met by Danish vessels that numbered 13 or 16 (sources vary on the number) and a battle ensued.[32] The Anglo-Saxon fleet emerged victorious and as Huntingdon accounts, "laden with spoils".[33] The victorious fleet was then caught unawares when attempting to leave the River Stour, and was attacked by a Danish force at the mouth of the river. The Danish fleet defeated Alfred's fleet, which may have been weakened in the previous engagement.[34]

A year later, in 886, Alfred reoccupied the city of London and set out to make it habitable again.[35] Alfred entrusted the city to the care of his son-in-law Æthelred, ealdorman of Mercia. The restoration of London progressed through the latter half of the 880s and is believed to have revolved around a new street plan; added fortifications in addition to the existing Roman walls; and, some believe, the construction of matching fortifications on the south bank of the River Thames.[36]



A plaque in the City of London noting the restoration of the Roman walled city by Alfred.

This is also the period in which almost all chroniclers agree that the Saxon people of pre-unification England submitted to Alfred.[37] This was not, however, the point at which Alfred came to be known as King of England; in fact he would never adopt the title for himself.

Between the restoration of London and the resumption of large-scale Danish attacks in the early 890s, Alfred's reign was rather uneventful. The relative peace of the late 880s was marred by the death of Alfred's sister, Æthelswith, en route to Rome in 888.[38] In the same year, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Æthelred, also died. One year later, Guthrum, or Athelstan by his baptismal name, Alfred's former enemy and king of East Anglia, died and was buried in Hadleigh, Suffolk.[39]

Guthrum's passing changed the political landscape for Alfred. The resulting power vacuum stirred up other power–hungry warlords eager to take his place in the following years. The quiet years of Alfred's life were coming to a close, and war was on the horizon.[40]

Further Viking attacks repelled (890s)

After another lull, in the autumn of 892 or 893, the Danes attacked again. Finding their position in mainland Europe precarious, they crossed to England in 330 ships in two divisions. They entrenched themselves, the larger body at Appledore, Kent, and the lesser, under Hastein, at Milton, also in Kent. The invaders brought their wives and children with them, indicating a meaningful attempt at conquest and colonisation. Alfred, in 893 or 894, took up a position from which he could observe both forces.[41]

While he was in talks with Hastein, the Danes at Appledore broke out and struck northwestwards. They were overtaken by Alfred's eldest son, Edward, and were defeated in a general engagement at Farnham in Surrey. They took refuge on an island at Thorney, on the River Colne between Buckinghamshire and Middlesex, where they were blockaded and forced to give hostages and promise to leave Wessex.[42][41] They then went to Essex and, after suffering another defeat at Benfleet, joined with Hastein's force at Shoebury.[42]

Alfred had been on his way to relieve his son at Thorney when he heard that the Northumbrian and East Anglian Danes were besieging Exeter and an unnamed stronghold on the North Devon shore. Alfred at once hurried westward and raised the Siege of Exeter. The fate of the other place is not recorded.[43]

Meanwhile, the force under Hastein set out to march up the Thames Valley, possibly with the idea of assisting their friends in the west. They were met by a large force under the three great ealdormen of Mercia, Wiltshire and Somerset, and forced to head off to the northwest, being finally overtaken and blockaded at Buttington. (Some identify this with Buttington Tump at the mouth of the River Wye, others with Buttington near Welshpool.) An attempt to break through the English lines was defeated. Those who escaped retreated to Shoebury. After collecting reinforcements, they made a sudden dash across England and occupied the ruined Roman walls of Chester. The English did not attempt a winter blockade, but contented themselves with destroying all the supplies in the district.[43]

Early in 894 or 895, lack of food obliged the Danes to retire once more to Essex. At the end of the year, the Danes drew their ships up the River Thames and River Lea and fortified themselves twenty miles (32 km) north of London. A direct attack on the Danish lines failed but, later in the year, Alfred saw a means of obstructing the river so as to prevent the egress of the Danish ships. The Danes realised that they were outmanoeuvred. They struck off north-westwards and wintered at Cwatbridge near Bridgnorth. The next year, 896 (or 897), they gave up the struggle. Some retired to Northumbria, some to East Anglia. Those who had no connections in England withdrew back to the continent.[43]

Military reorganisation

The Germanic tribes who invaded Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries relied upon the unarmoured infantry supplied by their tribal levy, or fyrd, and it was upon this system that the military power of the several kingdoms of early Anglo-Saxon England depended.[44] The fyrd was a local militia in the Anglo-Saxon shire, in which all freemen had to serve; those who refused military service were subject to fines or loss of their land.[45] According to the law code of King Ine of Wessex, issued in about 694:

> If a nobleman who holds land neglects military service, he shall pay 120 shillings and forfeit his land; a nobleman who holds no land shall pay 60 shillings; a commoner shall pay a fine of 30 shillings for neglecting military service.[46]

Alfred the Great silver offering penny, 871–899. Legend: AELFRED REX SAXONUM "Ælfred King of the Saxons".

Wessex's history of failures preceding his success in 878 emphasised to Alfred that the traditional system of battle he had inherited played to the Danes' advantage. While both the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes attacked settlements to seize wealth and other resources, they employed very different strategies. In their raids, the Anglo-Saxons traditionally preferred to attack head-on by assembling their forces in a shield wall, advancing against their target and overcoming the oncoming wall marshaled against them in defence.[47]

In contrast, the Danes preferred to choose easy targets, mapping cautious forays designed to avoid risking all their accumulated plunder with high-stake attacks for more. Alfred determined their strategy was to launch smaller scaled attacks from a secure and reinforced defensible base to which they could retreat should their raiders meet strong resistance.[47]

These bases were prepared in advance, often by capturing an estate and augmenting its defences with surrounding ditches, ramparts and palisades. Once inside the fortification, Alfred realised, the Danes enjoyed the advantage, better situated to outlast their opponents or crush them with a counter-attack as the provisions and stamina of the besieging forces waned.[47]

The means by which the Anglo-Saxons marshaled forces to defend against marauders also left them vulnerable to the Vikings. It was the responsibility of the shire fyrd to deal with local raids. The king could call up the national militia to defend the kingdom; but in the case of the Viking hit-and-run raids, problems with communication and raising supplies meant that the national militia could not be mustered quickly enough: It was only after the raids were underway that a call went out to landowners to gather their men for battle. Large regions could be devastated before the fyrd could assemble and arrive. And although the landowners were obliged to the king to supply these men when called, during the attacks in 878, many of them opportunistically abandoned their king and collaborated with Guthrum.[48][49]

With these lessons in mind, Alfred capitalised on the relatively peaceful years immediately following his victory at Edington by focusing on an ambitious restructuring of his kingdom's military defences. On a trip to Rome, Alfred had stayed with Charles the Bald and it is possible that he may have studied how the Carolingian kings had dealt with the Viking problem and, learning from their experiences, was able to put together a system of taxation and defence for his own kingdom. Also, there had been a system of fortifications in pre-Viking Mercia that may have been an influence. So when the Viking raids resumed in 892, Alfred was better prepared to confront them with a standing, mobile field army, a network of garrisons, and a small fleet of ships navigating the rivers and estuaries.[50][51][52]

Administration and taxation

Tenants in Anglo-Saxon England had a threefold obligation based on their landholding: the so-called "common burdens" of military service, fortress work, and bridge repair. This threefold obligation has traditionally been called *trinoda neccessitas* or *trimoda neccessitas*.[53] The Old English name for the fine due for neglecting military service was *fierdwite* or *fyrdwitee*.[46]

To maintain the burhs, and to reorganise the fyrd as a standing army, Alfred expanded the tax and conscription system based on the productivity of a tenant's landholding. The hide was the basic unit of the system on which the tenant's public obligations were assessed. A hide is thought to represent the amount of land required to support one family. The hide would differ in size according to the value and resources of the land, and the landowner would have to provide service based on how many hides he owned.[53][54]

Burghal system

At the centre of Alfred's reformed military defence system was the network of burhs, distributed at strategic points throughout the kingdom.[55] There were thirty-three in total, spaced approximately 30 kilometres (19 miles) apart, enabling the military to confront attacks anywhere in the kingdom within a single day.[56][57]

Alfred's burhs (later termed boroughs) ranged from former Roman towns, such as Winchester, where the stone walls were repaired and ditches added, to massive earthen walls surrounded by wide ditches, probably reinforced with wooden revetments and palisades, such as at Burpham, Sussex.[58][59] The size of the burhs ranged from tiny outposts such as Pilton to large fortifications in established towns, the largest being at Winchester.[60]

A map of burhs named in the Burghal Hidage.

A contemporary document now known as the Burghal Hidage provides an insight into how the system worked. It lists the hidage for each of the fortified towns contained in the document. For example, Wallingford had a hidage of 2400, which meant that the landowners there were responsible for supplying and feeding 2,400 men, the number sufficient for maintaining 9,900 feet (3.0 kilometres) of wall.[61] A total of 27,071 soldiers were needed system-wide, or approximately one in four of all the free men in Wessex.[62]

Many of the burhs were twin towns that straddled a river and were connected by a fortified bridge, like those built by Charles the Bald a generation before.[51] The double-burh blocked passage on the river, forcing Viking ships to navigate under a garrisoned bridge lined with men armed with stones, spears, or arrows. Other burhs were sited near fortified royal villas, allowing the king better control over his strongholds.[63] The burhs were also interconnected by a road system maintained for army use (known as *herepaths*). These roads would allow an army to be quickly assembled, sometimes from more than one burh, to confront the Viking invader.[64] This network posed significant obstacles to Viking invaders, especially those laden with booty. The system threatened Viking routes and communications, making it far more dangerous for the Viking raiders. The Vikings lacked both the equipment necessary to undertake a siege against a burh and a developed doctrine of siegecraft, having tailored their methods of fighting to rapid strikes and unimpeded retreats to well-defended fortifications. The only means left to them was to starve the burh into submission, but this gave the king time to send his mobile field army or garrisons from neighbouring burhs along the well-maintained army roads. In such cases, the Vikings were extremely vulnerable to pursuit by the king's joint military forces.[65] Alfred's burh system posed such a formidable challenge against Viking attack that when the Vikings returned in 892 and successfully stormed a half-made, poorly garrisoned fortress up the Lympne estuary in Kent, the Anglo-Saxons were able to limit their penetration to the outer frontiers of Wessex and Mercia[66]

Alfred's burghal system was revolutionary in its strategic conception and potentially expensive in its execution. His contemporary biographer Asser wrote that many nobles balked at the new demands placed upon them, even though they were for "the common needs of the kingdom".[67][68]

English navy

Alfred also tried his hand at naval design. In 896,[69] he ordered the construction of a small fleet, perhaps a dozen or so longships that, at 60 oars, were twice the size of Viking warships. This was not, as the Victorians asserted, the birth of the English Navy. Wessex had possessed a royal fleet before this. King Athelstan of Kent and Ealdorman Ealhhere had defeated a Viking fleet in 851, capturing nine ships,[70] and Alfred himself had conducted naval actions in 882.[71]

But, clearly, the author of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and probably Alfred himself regarded 897 as marking an important development in the naval power of Wessex. The chronicler flattered his royal patron by boasting that Alfred's ships were not only larger, but swifter, steadier and rode higher in the water than either Danish or Frisian ships. It is probable that, under the classical tutelage of Asser, Alfred utilised the design of Greek and Roman warships, with high sides, designed for fighting rather than for navigation.[72]

Alfred had seapower in mind—if he could intercept raiding fleets before they landed, he could spare his kingdom from being ravaged. Alfred's ships may have been superior in conception. In practice, they proved to be too large to manoeuvre well in the close waters of estuaries and rivers, the only places in which a naval battle could occur.[73]

The warships of the time were not designed to be ship killers, but rather troop carriers. It has been suggested that, like sea battles in late Viking age Scandinavia, these battles may have entailed a ship coming alongside an enemy vessel, at which point the crew would lash the two ships together before boarding the enemy craft. The result was effectively a land battle involving hand-to-hand fighting on board the two lashed vessels.[74]

In the one recorded naval engagement in 896,[75][69] Alfred's new fleet of nine ships intercepted six Viking ships in the mouth of an unidentified river along the south of England. The Danes had beached half their ships and gone inland, either to rest their rowers or to forage for food. Alfred's ships immediately moved to block their escape to the sea. The three Viking ships afloat attempted to break through the English lines. Only one made it; Alfred's ships intercepted the other two.[69]

Lashing the Viking boats to their own, the English crew boarded the enemy's vessels and proceeded to kill everyone on board. The one ship that escaped managed to do so only because all of Alfred's heavy ships became grounded when the tide went out.[74] What ensued was a land battle between the crews of the grounded ships. The Danes, heavily outnumbered, would have been wiped out if the tide had not risen. When that occurred, the Danes rushed back to their boats, which being lighter, with shallower drafts, were freed before Alfred's ships. Helplessly, the English watched as the Vikings rowed past them.[74] The pirates had suffered so many casualties (120 Danes dead against 62 Frisians and English) that they had difficulty putting out to sea. All were too damaged to row around Sussex and two were driven against the Sussex coast (possibly at Selsey Bill).[69][74] The shipwrecked sailors were brought before Alfred at Winchester and hanged.[69]

Legal reform


A silver coin of Alfred.

In the late 880s or early 890s, Alfred issued a long *domboc* or law code, consisting of his "own" laws followed by a code issued by his late seventh-century predecessor King Ine of Wessex.[76] Together these laws are arranged into 120 chapters. In his introduction, Alfred explains that he gathered together the laws he found in many "synod-books" and "ordered to be written many of the ones that our forefathers observed—those that pleased me; and many of the ones that did not please me, I rejected with the advice of my councillors, and commanded them to be observed in a different way".[77]

Alfred singled out in particular the laws that he "found in the days of Ine, my kinsman, or Offa, king of the Mercians, or King Æthelberht of Kent, who first among the English people received baptism." He appended rather than integrated the laws of Ine into his code, and although he included, as had Æthelbert, a scale of payments in compensation for injuries to various body parts, the two injury tariffs are not aligned. Offa is not known to have issued a law code, leading historian Patrick Wormald to speculate that Alfred had in mind the legatine capitulary of 786 that was presented to Offa by two papal legates.[78]

About a fifth of the law code is taken up by Alfred's introduction, which includes translations into English of the Ten Commandments, a few chapters from the Book of Exodus, and the "Apostolic Letter" from Acts of the Apostles (15:23–29). The Introduction may best be understood as Alfred's meditation upon the meaning of

Christian law.[79] It traces the continuity between God's gift of law to Moses to Alfred's own issuance of law to the West Saxon people. By doing so, it linked the holy past to the historical present and represented Alfred's law-giving as a type of divine legislation.[80]

Similarly, Alfred divided his code into 120 chapters, because 120 was the age at which Moses died and, in the number-symbolism of early medieval biblical exegetes, 120 stood for law.[81] The link between the Mosaic Law and Alfred's code is the "Apostolic Letter," which explained that Christ "had come not to shatter or annul the commandments but to fulfill them; and he taught mercy and meekness" (Intro, 49.1). The mercy that Christ infused into Mosaic Law underlies the injury tariffs that figure so prominently in barbarian law codes, since Christian synods "established, through that mercy which Christ taught, that for almost every misdeed at the first offence secular lords might with their permission receive without sin the monetary compensation, which they then fixed".[82]

The only crime that could not be compensated with a payment of money was treachery to a lord, "since Almighty God adjudged none for those who despised Him, nor did Christ, the Son of God, adjudge any for the one who betrayed Him to death; and He commanded everyone to love his lord as Himself".[82] Alfred's transformation of Christ's commandment from "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt. 22:39–40) to love your secular lord as you would love the Lord Christ himself underscores the importance that Alfred placed upon lordship, which he understood as a sacred bond instituted by God for the governance of man.[83]

When one turns from the *domboc*'s introduction to the laws themselves, it is difficult to uncover any logical arrangement. The impression one receives is of a hodgepodge of miscellaneous laws. The law code, as it has been preserved, is singularly unsuitable for use in lawsuits. In fact, several of Alfred's laws contradicted the laws of Ine that form an integral part of the code. Patrick Wormald's explanation is that Alfred's law code should be understood not as a legal manual, but as an ideological manifesto of kingship, "designed more for symbolic impact than for practical direction".[84] In practical terms, the most important law in the code may well have been the very first: "We enjoin, what is most necessary, that each man keep carefully his oath and his pledge," which expresses a fundamental tenet of Anglo-Saxon law.[85]

Alfred devoted considerable attention and thought to judicial matters. Asser underscores his concern for judicial fairness. Alfred, according to Asser, insisted upon reviewing contested judgments made by his ealdormen and reeves, and "would carefully look into nearly all the judgements which were passed [issued] in his absence anywhere in the realm, to see whether they were just or unjust".[86] A charter from the reign of his son Edward the Elder depicts Alfred as hearing one such appeal in his chamber, while washing his hands.[87]

Asser represents Alfred as a Solomonic judge, painstaking in his own judicial investigations and critical of royal officials who rendered unjust or unwise judgments. Although Asser never mentions Alfred's law code, he does say that Alfred insisted that his judges be literate so that they could apply themselves "to the pursuit of wisdom." The failure to comply with this royal order was to be punished by loss of office.[88]

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, commissioned at the time of Alfred, was probably written to promote unification (of England),[89] whereas Asser's *The Life of King Alfred* promoted Alfred's achievements and personal qualities. It was possible that the document was designed this way, so that it could be disseminated in Wales, as Alfred had recently acquired overlordship of that country.[89]

Foreign relations

Asser speaks grandiosely of Alfred's relations with foreign powers, but little definite information is available.[43] His interest in foreign countries is shown by the insertions which he made in his translation of Orosius. He corresponded with Elias III, the Patriarch of Jerusalem,[43] and embassies to Rome conveying the English alms to the Pope were fairly frequent.[51][d] Around 890, Wulfstan of Hedeby undertook a journey from Hedeby on Jutland along the Baltic Sea to the Prussian trading town of Truso. Alfred personally collected details of this trip.[90]

Alfred's relations with the Celtic princes in the western half of Britain are clearer. Comparatively early in his reign, according to Asser, the southern Welsh princes, owing to the pressure on them from North Wales and Mercia, commended themselves to Alfred. Later in his reign the North Welsh followed their example, and the latter cooperated with the English in the campaign of 893 (or 894). That Alfred sent alms to Irish and Continental monasteries may be taken on Asser's authority. The visit of the three pilgrim "Scots" (i.e. Irish) to Alfred in 891 is undoubtedly authentic. The story that he himself in his childhood was sent to Ireland to be healed by Saint Modwenna, though mythical, may show Alfred's interest in that island.[43]

Religion and culture

In the 880s, at the same time that he was "cajoling and threatening" his nobles to build and man the burhs, Alfred, perhaps inspired by the example of Charlemagne almost a century before, undertook an equally ambitious effort to revive learning.[43] At this time period, the Viking raids were often seen as a divine punishment, and Alfred may have wished to revive religion in order to appease God's wrath.[91] This revival entailed the recruitment of clerical scholars from Mercia, Wales and abroad to enhance the tenor of the court and of the episcopacy; the establishment of a court school to educate his own children, the sons of his nobles, and intellectually promising boys of lesser birth; an attempt to require literacy in those who held offices of authority; a series of translations into the vernacular of Latin works the king deemed "most necessary for all men to know";[92] the compilation of a chronicle detailing the rise of Alfred's kingdom and house, with a genealogy that stretched back to Adam, thus giving the West Saxon kings a biblical ancestry.[93]

King Alfred the Great pictured in a stained glass window in the West Window of the South Transept of Bristol Cathedral.

Very little is known of the church under Alfred. The Danish attacks had been particularly damaging to the monasteries, and though Alfred founded monasteries at Athelney and Shaftesbury, these were the first new monastic houses in Wessex since the beginning of the eighth century.[94] According to Asser, Alfred enticed foreign monks to England for his monastery at Athelney as there was little interest for the locals to take up the monastic life.[95]

Alfred undertook no systematic reform of ecclesiastical institutions or religious practices in Wessex. For him the key to the kingdom's spiritual revival was to appoint pious, learned, and trustworthy bishops and abbots. As king he saw himself as responsible for both the temporal and spiritual welfare of his subjects. Secular and spiritual authority were not distinct categories for Alfred.[96][97]

He was equally comfortable distributing his translation of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* to his bishops so that they might better train and supervise priests, and using those same bishops as royal officials and judges. Nor did his piety prevent him from expropriating strategically sited church lands, especially estates along the border with

the Danelaw, and transferring them to royal thegns and officials who could better defend them against Viking attacks.[97][98]

Impact of Danish raids on education

The Danish raids had a devastating effect on learning in England. Alfred lamented in the preface to his translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* that "learning had declined so thoroughly in England that there were very few men on this side of the Humber who could understand their divine services in English, or even translate a single letter from Latin into English: and I suppose that there were not many beyond the Humber either".[99] Alfred undoubtedly exaggerated for dramatic effect the abysmal state of learning in England during his youth.[100] That Latin learning had not been obliterated is evidenced by the presence in his court of learned Mercian and West Saxon clerics such as Plegmund, Wæferth, and Wulfsige.[101]

Manuscript production in England dropped off precipitously around the 860s when the Viking invasions began in earnest, not to be revived until the end of the century.[102] Numerous Anglo-Saxon manuscripts burnt up along with the churches that housed them. And a solemn diploma from Christ Church, Canterbury dated 873 is so poorly constructed and written that historian Nicholas Brooks posited a scribe who was either so blind he could not read what he wrote or who knew little or no Latin. "It is clear", Brooks concludes, "that the metropolitan church [of Canterbury] must have been quite unable to provide any effective training in the scriptures or in Christian worship".[103]

Establishment of a court school

Following the example of Charlemagne, Alfred established a court school for the education of his own children, those of the nobility, and "a good many of lesser birth".[92] There they studied books in both English and Latin and "devoted themselves to writing, to such an extent .... they were seen to be devoted and intelligent students of the liberal arts".[104] He recruited scholars from the Continent and from Britain to aid in the revival of Christian learning in Wessex and to provide the king personal instruction. Grimbald and John the Saxon came from Francia; Plegmund (whom Alfred appointed archbishop of Canterbury in 890), Bishop Werferth of Worcester, Æthelstan, and the royal chaplains Werwulf, from Mercia; and Asser, from St David's in southwestern Wales.[105]

Advocacy of education in the English language

Alfred's educational ambitions seem to have extended beyond the establishment of a court school. Believing that without Christian wisdom there can be neither prosperity nor success in war, Alfred aimed "to set to learning (as long as they are not useful for some other employment) all the free-born young men now in England who have the means to apply themselves to it".[106] Conscious of the decay of Latin literacy in his realm, Alfred proposed that primary education be taught in English, with those wishing to advance to holy orders to continue their studies in Latin.[107]

There were few "books of wisdom" written in English. Alfred sought to remedy this through an ambitious court-centred programme of translating into English the books he deemed "most necessary for all men to know."[107] It is unknown when Alfred launched this programme, but it may have been during the 880s when Wessex was enjoying a respite from Viking attacks. Alfred was until recently often considered to have been the author of many of the translations, but this is now considered doubtful in almost all cases, and scholars more often refer to translations as 'Alfredian', indicating that they probably had something to do with his patronage, but are unlikely to be his own work.[108]

Apart from the lost *Handboc* or *Encheiridion,* which seems to have been a commonplace book kept by the king, the earliest work to be translated was the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, a book greatly popular in the Middle Ages. The translation was undertaken at Alfred's command by Werferth, Bishop of Worcester, with the king merely furnishing a preface.[43] Remarkably, Alfred, undoubtedly with the advice and aid of his court scholars, translated four works himself: Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, St. Augustine's *Soliloquies*, and the first fifty psalms of the Psalter.[109]

One might add to this list the translation, in Alfred's law code, of excerpts from the Vulgate Book of Exodus. The Old English versions of Orosius's *Histories against the Pagans* and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* are no longer accepted by scholars as Alfred's own translations because of lexical and stylistic differences.[109] Nonetheless, the consensus remains that they were part of the Alfredian programme of translation. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge suggest this also for Bald's *Leechbook* and the anonymous *Old English Martyrology*.[110]

Alfred's supposedly translated Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care,* which he prefaced with an introduction explaining why he thought it necessary to translate works such as this one from Latin into English; the preface may indeed be Alfred's own. Although he described his method as translating "sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense," the translation actually keeps very close to his original, although through his choice of language he blurred throughout the distinction between spiritual and secular authority. Alfred meant the translation to be used and circulated it to all his bishops.[111] Interest in Alfred's translation of *Pastoral Care* was so enduring that copies were still being made in the 11th century.[112]

Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* was the most popular philosophical handbook of the Middle Ages. Unlike the translation of the *Pastoral Care*, the Alfredian text deals very freely with the original and though the late Dr. G. Schepss showed that many of the additions to the text are to be traced not to the translator himself,[113] but to the glosses and commentaries which he used, still there is much in the work which is distinctive to the translation and has been taken to reflect philosophies of kingship in Alfred's milieu. It is in the Boethius that the oft-quoted sentence occurs: "To speak briefly: I desired to live worthily as long as I lived, and after my life to leave to them that should come after, my memory in good works".[114] The book has come down to us in two manuscripts only. In one of these[115] the writing is prose, in the other[116] a combination of prose and alliterating verse. The latter manuscript was severely damaged in the 18th and 19th centuries.[117]

The last of the Alfredian works is one which bears the name *Blostman*, i.e., "Blooms" or Anthology. The first half is based mainly on the *Soliloquies* of St Augustine of Hippo, the remainder is drawn from various sources. The material has traditionally been thought to contain much that is Alfred's own and highly characteristic of him. The last words of it may be quoted; they form a fitting epitaph for the noblest of English kings. "Therefore, he seems to me a very foolish man, and truly wretched, who will not increase his understanding while he is in the world, and ever wish and long to reach that endless life where all shall be made clear".[111] Alfred appears as a character in the twelfth- or thirteenth-century poem *The Owl and the Nightingale,* where his wisdom and skill with proverbs is praised. *The Proverbs of Alfred*, a thirteenth-century work, contains sayings that are not likely to have originated with Alfred but attest to his posthumous medieval reputation for wisdom.[118]

The Alfred jewel, discovered in Somerset in 1693, has long been associated with King Alfred because of its Old English inscription "AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN" (*Alfred ordered me to be made*). The jewel is about $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches (6.4 centimetres) long, made of filigreed gold, enclosing a highly polished piece of quartz crystal beneath which is set a cloisonné enamel plaque, with an enamelled image of a man holding floriate sceptres, perhaps personifying Sight or the Wisdom of God.[119]

It was at one time attached to a thin rod or stick based on the hollow socket at its base. The jewel certainly dates from Alfred's reign. Although its function is unknown, it has been often suggested that the jewel was one of the *æstels*—pointers for reading—that Alfred ordered sent to every bishopric accompanying a copy of his translation of the *Pastoral Care*. Each *æstel* was worth the princely sum of 50 mancuses, which fits in well with the quality workmanship and expensive materials of the Alfred jewel".[120]

2A drawing of the Alfred Jewel.

Historian Richard Abels sees Alfred's educational and military reforms as complementary. Restoring religion and learning in Wessex, Abels contends, was to Alfred's mind as essential to the defence of his realm as the building of the burhs.[121] As Alfred observed in the preface to his English translation of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, kings who fail to obey their divine duty to promote learning can expect earthly punishments to befall their people.[122] The pursuit of wisdom, he assured his readers of the Boethius, was the surest path to power: "Study Wisdom, then, and, when you have learned it, condemn it not, for I tell you that by its means you may without fail attain to power, yea, even though not desiring it".[123]

The portrayal of the West-Saxon resistance to the Vikings by Asser and the chronicler as a Christian holy war was more than mere rhetoric or 'propaganda'. It reflected Alfred's own belief in a doctrine of divine rewards and punishments rooted in a vision of a hierarchical Christian world order in which God is the Lord to whom kings owe obedience and through whom they derive their authority over their followers. The need to persuade his nobles to undertake work for the 'common good' led Alfred and his court scholars to strengthen and deepen the conception of Christian kingship that he had inherited by building upon the legacy of earlier kings such as Offa as well as clerical writers such as Bede, Alcuin and the other luminaries of the Carolingian renaissance. This was not a cynical use of religion to manipulate his subjects into obedience, but an intrinsic element in Alfred's worldview. He believed, as did other kings in ninth-century England and Francia, that God had entrusted him with the spiritual as well as physical welfare of his people. If the Christian faith fell into ruin in his kingdom, if the clergy were too ignorant to understand the Latin words they butchered in their offices and liturgies, if the ancient monasteries and collegiate churches lay deserted out of indifference, he was answerable before God, as Josiah had been. Alfred's ultimate responsibility was the pastoral care of his people.[121]


The Alfred Jewel, in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, commissioned by Alfred.

Appearance and character

Asser wrote of Alfred in his *Life of King Alfred*:

> Now, he was greatly loved, more than all his brothers, by his father and mother—indeed, by everybody—with a universal and profound love, and he was always brought up in the royal court and nowhere else. ... [He] was seen to be more comely in appearance than his other brothers, and more

> pleasing in manner, speech and behaviour ... [and] in spite of all the demands of the present life, it has been the desire for wisdom, more than anything else, together with the nobility of his birth, which have characterized the nature of his noble mind.[124]

It is also written by Asser that Alfred did not learn to read until he was twelve years old or later, which is described as "shameful negligence" of his parents and tutors. Alfred was an excellent listener and had an incredible memory, and he retained poetry and psalms very well. A story is told by Asser about how his mother held up a book of Saxon poetry to him and his brothers, and said; "I shall give this book to whichever one of you can learn it the fastest." After excitedly asking, "Will you really give this book to the one of us who can understand it the soonest and recite it to you?" Alfred then took it to his teacher, learned it, and recited it back to his mother.[125]

Alfred is also noted as carrying around a small book, probably a medieval version of a small pocket notebook, which contained psalms and many prayers that he often collected. Asser writes: "[these] he collected in a single book, as I have seen for myself; amid all the affairs of the present life he took it around with him everywhere for the sake of prayer, and was inseparable from it".[125]

An excellent hunter in every branch of the sport, Alfred is remembered as an enthusiastic huntsman against whom nobody's skills could compare.[125]

Although he was the youngest of his brothers, he was probably the most open-minded. He was an early advocate for education. His desire for learning could have come from his early love of English poetry and inability to read or physically record it until later in life. Asser writes that "[Alfred] could not satisfy his craving for what he desired the most, namely the liberal arts; for, as he used to say, there were no good scholars in the entire kingdom of the West Saxons at that time".[125]

Family

In 868, Alfred married Ealhswith, daughter of a Mercian nobleman, Æthelred Mucil, Ealdorman of the Gaini. The Gaini were probably one of the tribal groups of the Mercians. Ealhswith's mother, Eadburh, was a member of the Mercian royal family.[126]

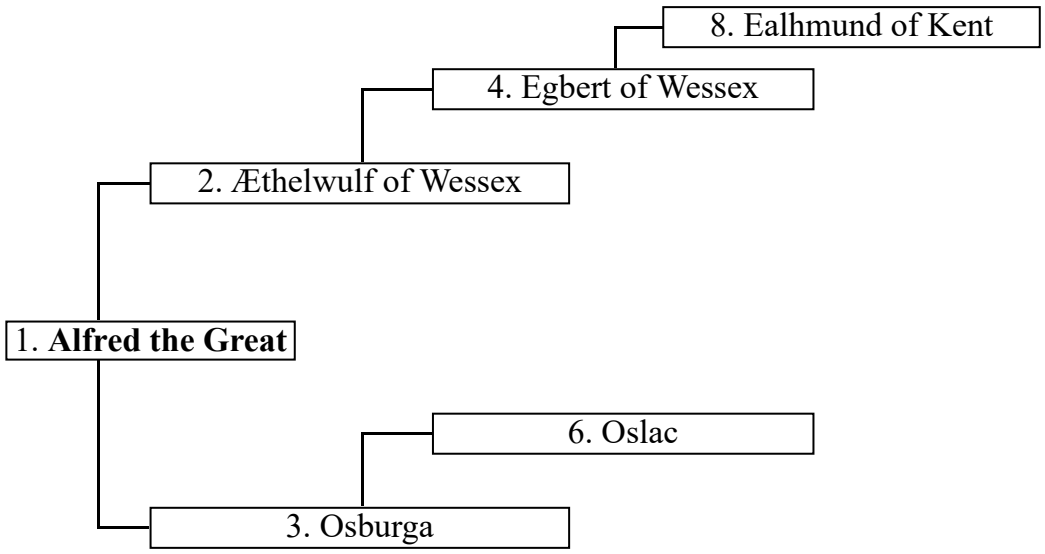
They had five or six children together, including Edward the Elder who succeeded his father as king, Æthelflæd who became Lady (ruler) of the Mercians in her own right, and Ælfthryth who married Baldwin II the Count of Flanders. His mother was Osburga daughter of Oslac of the Isle of Wight, Chief Butler of England. Asser, in his *Vita Ælfredi* asserts that this shows his lineage from the Jutes of the Isle of Wight. This is unlikely as Bede tells us that they were all slaughtered by the Saxons under Cædwalla. In 2008 the skeleton of Queen Eadgyth, granddaughter of Alfred the Great was found in Magdeburg Cathedral in Germany. It was confirmed in 2010 that these remains belong to her — one of the earliest members of the English royal family.[127]

Osferth was described as a relative in King Alfred's will and he attested charters in a high position until 934. A charter of King Edward's reign described him as the king's brother, "mistakenly" according to Keynes and Lapidge, but in the view of Janet Nelson, he probably was an illegitimate son of King Alfred.[128][129]

Name	Birth	Death	Notes
Æthelflæd		12 June 918	Married c 886, Æthelred, Lord of the Mercians d. 911; had children
Edward	c. 874	17 July 924	Married (1) Ecgwynn, (2) Ælfflæd, (3) 919 Eadgifu
Æthelgifu			Abbess of Shaftesbury
Æthelweard		16 October 922(?)	Married and had children
Ælfthryth		929	Married Baldwin II d. 918; had children

Ancestry

Ancestors of Alfred the Great



Source: *Abels. Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England.*[130]

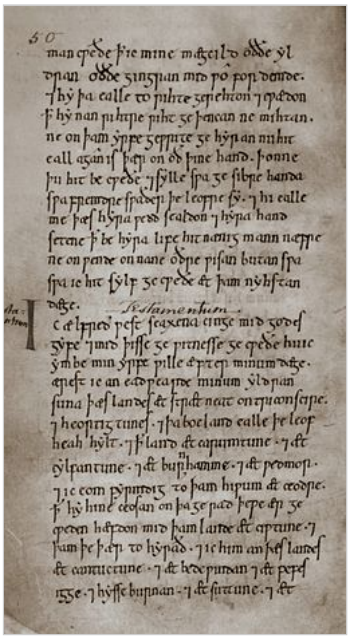
Death, burial and fate of remains

Alfred died on 26 October 899. How he died is unknown, although he suffered throughout his life with a painful and unpleasant illness. His biographer Asser gave a detailed description of Alfred's symptoms and this has allowed modern doctors to provide a possible diagnosis. It is thought that he had either Crohn's disease or haemorrhoidal disease.[7][131] His grandson King Eadred seems to have suffered from a similar illness.[132][e]

Alfred was originally buried temporarily in the Old Minster in Winchester; then, four years after his death, he was moved to the New Minster (perhaps built especially to receive his body). When the New Minster moved to Hyde, a little north of the city, in 1110, the monks were transferred to Hyde Abbey, along with Alfred's body and those of his wife and children, which were presumably interred before the high altar. Soon after the dissolution of the abbey in 1539, during the reign of Henry VIII, the church was demolished, leaving the graves intact.[134]

The royal graves and many others were probably rediscovered by chance in 1788 when a prison was being constructed by convicts on the site. Prisoners dug across the width of the altar area in order to dispose of rubble left at the dissolution. Coffins were stripped of lead, and bones were scattered and lost. The prison was demolished

between 1846 and 1850.[135] Further excavations in 1866 and 1897 were inconclusive.[134][136] In 1866, amateur antiquarian John Mellor claimed to have recovered a number of bones from the site which he said were those of Alfred. These later came into the possession of the vicar of nearby St Bartholomew's Church, who reburied them in an unmarked grave in the church graveyard.[135]


Alfred's will

Excavations conducted by the Winchester Museums Service of the Hyde Abbey site in 1999 located a second pit dug in front of where the high altar would have been located, which was identified as probably dating to Mellor's 1886 excavation.[134] The 1999 archeological excavation uncovered the foundations of the abbey buildings and some bones. Bones suggested at the time to be those of Alfred proved instead to belong to an elderly woman.[137]

In March 2013, the Diocese of Winchester exhumed the bones from the unmarked grave at St Bartholomew's and placed them in secure storage. The diocese made no claim they were the bones of Alfred, but intended to secure them for later analysis, and from the attentions of people whose interest may have been sparked by the recent identification of the remains of King Richard III.[137][138] The bones were radiocarbon-dated, but the results showed that they were from the 1300s and therefore unrelated to Alfred. In January 2014, a fragment of pelvis unearthed in the 1999 excavation of the Hyde site, which had subsequently lain in a Winchester museum store room, was radiocarbon-dated to the correct period. It has been suggested that this bone may belong to either Alfred or his son Edward, but this remains unproven.[139][140]

Legacy

Alfred is venerated as a saint by some Christian traditions, but an attempt by Henry VI of England in 1441 to have him canonized by the pope was unsuccessful.[141][f] The Anglican Communion venerates him as a Christian hero, with a feast day or commemoration on 26 October, and he may often be found depicted in stained glass in Church of England parish churches.[142]


Statue of Alfred the Great at Wantage, Oxfordshire

Alfred commissioned Bishop Asser to write his biography, which inevitably emphasised Alfred's positive aspects. Later medieval historians, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth also reinforced Alfred's favourable image. By the time of the Reformation Alfred was seen as being a pious Christian ruler, who promoted the use of English rather than Latin, and so the translations that he commissioned were viewed as untainted by the later Roman Catholic influences of the Normans. Consequently, it was writers of the sixteenth century who gave Alfred his epithet as 'the Great', rather than any of Alfred's contemporaries.[143] The epithet was retained by succeeding generations of Parliamentarians and empire-builders who saw Alfred's patriotism, success against barbarism, promotion of education and establishment of the rule of law as supporting their own ideals.[143]

A number of educational establishments are named in Alfred's honour. These include:

- The University of Winchester was created from the former 'King Alfred's College, Winchester' (1928 to 2004).
- Alfred University and Alfred State College in Alfred, New York are both named after the king.

- In honour of Alfred, the University of Liverpool created a King Alfred Chair of English Literature.
- King Alfred's Academy, a secondary school in Wantage, Oxfordshire, the birthplace of Alfred.
- King's Lodge School, in Chippenham, Wiltshire is so named because King Alfred's hunting lodge is reputed to have stood on or near the site of the school.
- The King Alfred School & Specialist Sports Academy, Burnham Road, Highbridge is so named due to its rough proximity to Brent Knoll (a Beacon site) and Athelney.
- The King Alfred School in Barnet, North London, UK.
- King Alfred's Middle School, Shaftesbury, Dorset [Now defunct after reorganisation]
- King's College, Taunton, Somerset. (The king in question is King Alfred).
- King Alfred's house in Bishop Stopford's School at Enfield.
- Saxonwold Primary School in Gauteng, South Africa names one of its houses after King Alfred. The others being Bede, Caedmon, and Dunston.

The Royal Navy has named one ship and two shore establishments HMS *King Alfred*, and one of the first ships of the US Navy was named USS *Alfred* in his honour. In 2002, Alfred was ranked number 14 in the BBC's list of the 100 Greatest Britons following a UK-wide vote.[144]

Statues

Pewsey

A prominent statue of King Alfred the Great stands in the middle of Pewsey. It was unveiled in June 1913 to commemorate the coronation of King George V.[145]

Wantage

A statue of Alfred the Great, situated in the Wantage market place, was sculpted by Count Gleichen, a relative of Queen Victoria, and unveiled on 14 July 1877 by the Prince and Princess of Wales.[146] The statue was vandalised on New Year's Eve 2007, losing part of its right arm and axe. After the arm and axe were replaced the statue was again vandalised on Christmas Eve 2008, losing its axe.[146]

Winchester

A bronze statue of Alfred the Great stands at the eastern end of The Broadway, close to the site of Winchester's medieval East Gate. The statue was designed by Hamo Thornycroft, and erected in 1899 to mark one thousand years since Alfred's death.[147][148] The statue is placed on a pedestal consisting of two immense blocks of gray Cornish granite.[149]

See also

- Cultural depictions of Alfred the Great

Notes

a. Alfred was the youngest of either four (Weir, Alison, *Britain's Royal Families: The Complete Genealogy* (1989), p.5) or five brothers,[2] the primary record conflicting regarding whether Æthelstan of Wessex was a brother or uncle.
b. The inscription reads "ALFRED THE GREAT AD 879 on this Summit Erected his Standard Against Danish Invaders To him We owe The Origin of Juries The Establishment of a Militia The Creation of a Naval Force ALFRED The Light of a

Benighted Age Was a Philosopher and a Christian The Father of his People The Founder of the English MONARCHY and LIBERTY" (Horspool 2006, pp. 173)

c. A **Chrisom** was the face-cloth, or piece of linen laid over a child's head when he or she was baptised or christened. Originally, the purpose of the chrisom-cloth was to keep the *chrism*, a consecrated oil, from accidentally rubbing off.[20]
d. Some versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reported that Alfred sent a delegation to India, but this could just mean Asia, and other versions say "Iudea" (Abels 1998, pp. 190–192).
e. According to St Dunstan's apprentice "...poor King Eadred would suck the juice out of the food, chew what remained for a little while and spit it out: a nasty practice that often turned the stomachs of the thegns who dined with him".[133]
f. Some Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that Alfred should be recognised as a saint. See Case for (http://www.orthodoxengland.org.uk/athlifea.htm) and Case against (http://sarisburium.blogspot.com/2008/11/king-alfred-of-england-orthodox-saint.html)

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Attribution

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Alfred the Great **House of Wessex** **Born:** 849 **Died:** 26 October 899		
Regnal titles		
Preceded by **Æthelred**	**Bretwalda** 871–899	**Last holder**
	King of Wessex 871–899	Succeeded by **Edward the Elder**
New title	**King of the Anglo-Saxons** 878–899	

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