

KING ALFRED THE GREAT

Alfred's childhood

Alfred was born in Wantage in today's Oxfordshire in AD849. He was the lively youngest son of Aethelwulf, the king of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex. One story tells how Alfred's mother promised a poetry book to the first of her children who could memorise it. Alfred immediately rose to the challenge and quickly learned every poem – and won the book.



King Alfred the Great is considered to be one of the greatest kings in English history. But what was so special about this Anglo-Saxon leader?

Alfred the warrior prince

By AD866, his fourth brother, Aethelred, was the king of Wessex. Alfred helped him defend Wessex against their great threat – the

Vikings. In AD871, a large Viking army arrived in Wessex. Even though the Anglo-Saxons won the Battle of Ashdown on the Berkshire Downs, the Vikings kept attacking. By the end of the year, Aethelred had been killed and Alfred was king.



Alfred's escape

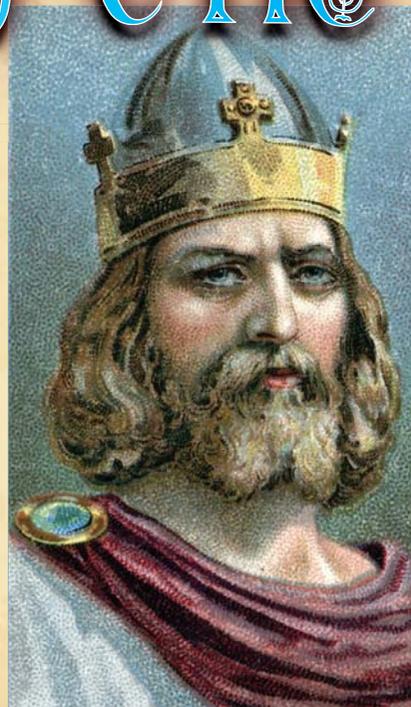
To stop the Viking raids, Alfred reluctantly agreed to pay them money every year. However, this changed in AD878 when the Viking leader, Guthrum, decided to attack Wessex. In January, as the Saxons were enjoying Christmas in their homes, the Vikings struck. Many Saxons were killed but Alfred and a few of his followers escaped and hid in the marshes of Somerset.



It was here that Alfred was said to have burned the cakes of a peasant woman.

Alfred's victory

In the marshes, Alfred built a fort and secretly began to gather up his Saxon troops. By spring the Saxons had crushed the Vikings at



the Battle of Edington in Wiltshire. Exhausted and beaten, Guthrum agreed to convert to Christianity and to allow the English to rule the South and the Vikings the North.

Alfred the defender

Alfred did not want to risk another Viking invasion so he defended his kingdom by building new forts around towns, called *burhs*. He also improved the army and built larger ships to stop coastal raids.

Alfred the lawmaker

Alfred believed that law and order was very important for his people. He established a code of laws based on the Old Testament and on laws used by other Anglo-Saxon leaders. He liked to keep an eye on the judgements that were being made, to check that his people were being treated fairly.

Alfred the educator

Alfred was a keen reader and writer and believed education should play a large part in his kingdom. He translated Latin texts into old English and encouraged other scholars and teachers to do the same. He wanted his people to be able to read texts in their own language as well as in traditional Latin.

Why was Alfred great?

King Alfred died around AD900. To his people, he was a brave and inspirational leader. His increased defences not only stopped Viking raids, they helped develop towns. This, along with his new laws and development of education, laid the foundations of our English nation.

Alison Milford

