

A Brief Biography of Alfred the Great

By Baron Sir Paul de Marseilles

There have been dozens of monarchs of England but only one has ever been awarded the title "The Great". There is no evidence that this title was ever used during his lifetime. He was simply known as King Alfred and he was the best known of the Anglo-Saxon Kings at the time of his death. The reason for his fame was simple. He saved Anglo-Saxons from the Vikings and laid the foundation for the unification of the English people. He reformed its army. He was a promoter of education and laid the foundation for English Common Law. These are only a few of the reasons why he has been called "Alfred the Great".

The Arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain

The term "Anglo-Saxons" is fairly broad and encompasses several different peoples including the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who immigrated from what is now northern Germany, Holland, and Denmark to England after the departure of the Romans. The Romans had occupied England from 43 A.D. to 410 A.D. The Saxons had been a sea based raiding force against the Romans as early as the 4th Century. Together with the Picts in the North and the Irish to the West, the Saxons were one of the primary reasons why Roman forces in Britain were almost 50,000 strong before their withdrawal in 383 A.D. The construction of Hadrian's Wall, which ran nearly seventy miles across the width of England, served as a deterrent to the Picts in the north. The deterrents to the Saxons who regularly raided the East and South coasts of England were not nearly as strong.

According to Gildas, a priest who wrote *On the Fall of Britain* around 550 A.D, many of the Roman garrisons were emptied by Magnus Maximus when he traveled to the European continent in a bid for the title of Emperor by 383 A.D. The Picts and the Irish increased their activities in Britain and another Roman army was sent to suppress the raiders. By 407, Constantine led most of the Roman soldiers out of Britain and across the Channel to face off against the Vandals in Gaul. Two years later (in 410), the Roman Emperor Honorius wrote to the Britons and warned them that they now had to look to their own defenses. Imperial Rome fell in 476. There is very little known about the fate of the Britons between 410 to 550 A.D. It is highly likely that their societies became dominated by a series of Warlords who offered power to some and protection for most. According to Gildas, the Britons hired Saxon armies to defend them against the Picts. The Saxons eventually mutinied sometime between 449 and 456 and were ultimately defeated by the Britons. This setback to the Anglo-Saxons was not long lasting. Gildas writes that Saxon armies were battling it out in Kent by 456. According to *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (written around 892), Aelle, one of the Saxon Warlords, and his followers arrived in Sussex by 477. Cerdic, Cynric, and their followers arrived in Wessex by 495. According to Bede, a monk who wrote *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in 731, these armies stayed and the Anglo-Saxons began the formation of the Kingdoms of Essex, East

Anglia, and Mercia. These early Anglo-Saxons were illiterate and there are little written historical records of their deeds and society. This lack of literacy did not mean the lack of a sophisticated culture. The burial mounds which have been found throughout England have revealed highly decorated pots and urns, intricate gold and silver work, dishes made in the Byzantium Empire and other items from Gaul to the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Coming of the Vikings

By the late sixth century, the Anglo-Saxons were occupying approximately 2/3 of what would later become Britain. These early Saxons were pagan and would remain so until the missionary work by St. Augustine and others around 597. By 550-600 A.D., these Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms included Northumbria, Mercia, Middle and East Anglia, Kent, Sussex, and Wessex. Smaller Kingdoms were eventually incorporated into these larger Kingdoms and were ruled by underkings and Ealdormen. The Celtic Kingdoms which existed roughly during the same time period included Gododdin in the North, Gwynedd, Powys and Dyfed to the West and Dummonia to the Southwest. As the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms continued to solidify, the native Celts were pushed to the fringes of Britain. Wales remained independent for some time thereafter. These Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms were agricultural societies and the vast majority of their people were farmers. The concept of kinship and lordship were the threads which bound their societies together. By the 7th-8th century, most of these kingdoms had adopted Christianity. By King Alfred's time (830-899), there were a little over a million people scattered throughout England. Despite the occupation of most of these Kingdom's inhabitants, they were not a peaceful people. The Saxons remembered their roots. Warfare between kingdoms and individuals was an accepted part of their social and political life. Saxon kings were elected by the nobility on the basis of their ability to protect their people, share their wealth among their followers, and to ensure prosperity. They were expected to demonstrate their military prowess since these activities brought wealth, tribute and new territories. Feuds, blood feuds, the payment of gold for death of their members, and exile were common elements of these societies. These societies also adopted legal codes which governed their internal operations as well as land charters. In addition, an extremely robust and vibrant trade and culture exchange existed between these societies and those on the European continent.

These Kingdoms were ill-prepared for the type of warfare that they were about to experience. In several instances, the Vikings were aided by the internal disunity among the Anglo-Saxon nobility. The first documented Viking raids on these Kingdoms occurred in the 790s. These raids were small, isolated attacks on the monasteries and some towns which provided easy access to movable wealth in terms of coin, valuable objects and slaves. The historical evidence indicates that these early raids were the work of the Norwegians rather than the Danes. As word of the success of these initial raids grew, the scale of these attacks increased in both intensity and frequency throughout the 830's and soon involved both the Danes and the Norwegians. The raiders appeared without warning, plundered, and then disappeared back onto the sea. By the 840s, the Vikings had established semi-permanent bases of operations in Dublin,

Ireland and along the coast line and waterways of the Frankish Kingdoms. By the 850's, the Viking attacks were becoming successively larger and more organized throughout Europe. Large fleets and armies were arriving on the coast of Britain on a yearly basis. The great armies of 865 and 871 were notable examples. These raiders were no longer interested in only opportunistic plunder. They were now bent upon conquest. There was little available land, coin or riches in the Norse countries. However, England enjoyed a surplus of these items. The only thing the Vikings had to do was rid themselves of the Saxon nobility.

The Early Life of King Alfred

Alfred was born sometime in 847 to 849. He was the youngest of the five children of Aethelwulf, the King of Wessex. There is little known about Alfred's early life since there are few surviving documents. He traveled to Rome in 853 where he was confirmed by Pope Leo IV. Aethelswith, his only sister and about ten years older than Alfred, married Burgred, the King of Mercia, when he was four or five. Mercia was one of the largest southern Saxon kingdoms. He was raised in the royal court which was unusual for that time and culture. The customary practice was to have a noble family help raise children.

Death was a common companion of Alfred's youth. Aethelstan, his oldest brother, died sometime between 851-855 after serving as an under-king for their father in Kent, Surrey, Sussex and Essex. He lost Osburh, his mother, in 854 and his father passed away in 858. Aethelbald, who was about 12 years older than Alfred, died in 860 after ruling the western shires of Wessex. Aethelberht, who was about 10 years older than Alfred, ruled for five years before passing away sometime in 865/866.

As a child, Alfred could neither read nor write but loved the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons which he memorized as it was read to him. Under the care of Court tutors, he would eventually learn to read English by age 12. In his youth, he learned court etiquette, hunting and how to fight. These later pursuits were someone hindered by a mysterious and chronic illness which would plague him off and on for the rest of his life. This illness (which may have been Crohn's disease), caused intense abdominal pain, digestive problems, and lethargy.

Alfred was 16 when the Saxon kingdom of Northumbria was taken by the Vikings and a client king was installed. Northumbria's King was blood-eagled as a sacrifice to Odin and the Kingdom was lost to the Vikings. Aethelred, the last of Alfred's brothers, became King of Wessex in 865. Alfred was 17 years old and became his brother's Viceroy (or second in command) of the army of the Kingdom. One of the great Viking army attacked Mercia shortly thereafter. King Burgred and Alfred's sister called to the Kingdom of Wessex for aid in 868. Alfred and his brother responded with an army but were unable to achieve any significant military results. The bonds of kinship between these two Saxon Kingdoms continued to be strengthened by the marriage of Alfred to Ealhswith, the daughter of Ethelred Mucal, a Mercian nobleman. Alfred became a member of the Royal Court of both Kingdoms. By 869, another

great army of the Danes fell upon the Saxon Kingdom of East Anglia and King Edmond died tied to a tree having been used for sport by Norse bowmen.

Wessex was the next target of the Danes. They began their assault upon that Kingdom in the winter of 870. Aethelred and Alfred led their armies against the Danes with varying degrees of success. They won victories at Englefield and Ashdown but suffered defeats at Reading, Basing, and Meretun. Aethelred, the last of Alfred's brothers, died of his wounds only twenty-eight days after the battle of Mertun in 871.

Alfred became King of Wessex at age twenty-two. All of his siblings had passed away with the exception of his sister. The fate of his Kingdom looked grim. The Danes had established permanent settlements in Northumbria, north Midlands, and East Anglia. During the first year of his Kingship, the Danes turned their attention to Mercia. Burgred and Aethelswith were forced to flee to Rome. Both would never return to England and would die as exiles. Ceolwulf II was installed as the new Client-King of Mercia with the support of the Danes in 873.

Wessex was now the only Saxon kingdom which had not been conquered by the Vikings. Alfred couldn't defeat them militarily and he was rapidly running out of options. He paid tribute ("Danegold") for the next five years. He and his armies fought off successive waves of Danish invaders in 876 and 877. In January of 878, a Danish army led by Guthrum left Danish-controlled Mercia and made a surprise attack on Chippenham, Alfred's royal villa. This pre-emptive strike was likely aided by the intrigue of Wulfhere, an Ealdorman of Wiltshire, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, both of whom had grown tired of the taxation caused by the payment of Danegold. Both were ambitious men who hoped that their betrayal would lead to better treatment by the Vikings when the inevitable came to Wessex. Alfred and a small group of loyal retainers were forced to flee. The Vikings had taken control of the last independent Saxon Kingdom in England.

The Last Hope of the Saxons

Alfred became a hunted man in his own kingdom and disappeared into the wild marsh lands of Somerset in the dead of winter. His father's kingdom and his people were on the edge of cultural extinction and England was about to become a Scandinavian country. Unlike many of his fellow nobles, Alfred refused to surrender in any way or form. For the next seven weeks, Alfred and his followers turned the tables on the Danes. It was now the Saxons who appeared without warning, raided and killed, and then disappeared back into the marshland. They conducted a series of guerilla raids against the Danes and their Saxon puppet king. Their base of operations was the small island of Athelney. Alfred sent messengers throughout every shire of Wessex seeking to assemble an army to take back their kingdom and to meet at Egbert's Stone.

Saxon armies were traditionally raised only from the immediate area where an attack was to be defended against or to be launched from. Despite this tradition, almost 4,000 Saxons from over three counties quietly slipped away from their towns, villages, and fields to join Alfred in

battle against the invaders. On May 4, 878, they marched upon Chippenham and defeated the Danes at the Battle of Edington. After twelve days of feasting, Alfred made Guthrum a Saxon prince and adopted him as a godson. In one brilliant stroke, Guthrum and his war captains were integrated into Saxon society. Their success in that society was dependent upon their loyalty to King Alfred. Guthrum and his people moved into East Anglia. He would remain a loyal vassal to Alfred until the end of his days.

As a result of the Peace of Chippenham (or as it is sometimes called the “Treaty of Wedmore”), England was divided into English and Danish spheres of influence. The Danes remained in East Anglia, East Mercia and Northumbria. This area became known as “Danelaw”. The southwest and west of England was reserved for the Saxons.

The Rebuilding of a Saxon Kingdom

Alfred had regained his Kingdom but it was a land which had been devastated by war. He devoted the remainder of his life to rebuilding his country. In order to protect Wessex’s borders, Alfred systematically organized the coastal defenses. He created over thirty burhs, heavily fortified defensive centers, across his kingdom. Each burh was located less than a day’s march from another and had its own market which helped pay for its upkeep. The burghs further aided in the development of trade throughout southern England. This defensive network substantially discouraged further attention from raiders. Alfred reorganized the Saxon army and set up a rotational system where half of his army was ready to take the field at any time. He and his army were able to beat off the Danes in subsequent attempts to invade Wessex and captured the city of London in 886. He then extensively fortified London to withstand any further attacks. Alfred established his overlordship in West Mercia, unified Wessex, and continued to retake parts of Mercia from the Danes. He was ultimately able to bring the Princes of southern Wales under his authority.

In addition to his military accomplishments, Alfred focused on the cultural and literary needs of his people. Many of the monasteries and educational centers had been pillaged and burned as a result of waves of Danish raids. Old monks were dying before they could teach the younger monks to read Latin. He assembled the best scholars he could find in southern England and abroad and placed them in Wessex. The group translated major Latin works into English to make them accessible to his subjects. He codified Saxon laws for his kingdom and mandated that the laws be written in English so that all of his subjects could know what was expected of them. This codification laid the foundation for English common law which would ultimately become one of the sources of law for the United States. These laws mandated that the sons of freedmen learn to read and write in English and further required the learning of Latin as a prerequisite for the holding of royal offices. He established royal schools to educate the children of his nobles. He commissioned the writing of the history of the Anglo-Saxon people. This document would become known as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. There are at least nine copies or fragments of this manuscript in the world. Seven can be found in the British Library. Others can

be found in the Bodleian Library at Oxford and the Parker Library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. An “on line” copy of this work can be found on the On Line Medieval and Classical Library. King Alfred even learned to read and write both English and Latin by the age of 38.

Alfred and Eathswith had five children who would survive into adulthood. These children built upon the foundation that had been laid by their father. Aethelflaed, their daughter, married the King of Mercia and would later be known as “the Lady of the Mercians”. After her husband’s death, she ruled the Saxon Kingdom of Mercia and became one of the most famous of the Saxon Warrior Queens. She personally led her armies to victory over the Danes at the battles of Derby, Leicester, and York. She supervised the building of fortresses in Warwick and Stanford. Edward, their son, became the King of Wessex and aided in driving the Danes out of York. He dedicated his life to the re-conquest of Danelaw. Together with his sister, they established a chain of fortifications in the South and middle of England and jointly led a major attack against the Danes in 917. Together with Alfred’s other kin, they helped drive the Danes out of Northumbria and East Anglia. Aelfthryth, another one of Alfred’s daughters, married Baldwin, the Count of Flanders. Matilda, a descendent of that union, would eventually marry William the Conqueror. The last son was Aethelweard.

Alfred the Great died on Friday, October 26, 899. He was fifty years old and his reign had lasted almost thirty years. During his lifetime, he had pulled Saxon England from the brink of destruction and helped forge a national identity. He was buried in the old Minster at Winchester. At the time of his death, he was the best known of all of the Saxon Kings of England.

Sources: Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great, War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Addison, Wesley, Longman Limited, 1998); Mike Ashley, *A Brief History of British Kings and Queens* (Carroll & Graf, 2002); James Campbell, Ed., *The Anglo-Saxons* (Penguin Books, 1982); Kenneth O. Morgan, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1989); Justin Pollard, *Alfred the Great* (John Murray, 2005).