



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

ALFRED THE GREAT

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Alfred the Great – A short introductory history

Introduction

(I will use the generic term Vikings in the below article, though most of Alfred's opponents were Danes)

To write a full history of Alfred the Great would neither do justice to this great King or to his achievements. Somehow, when all seemed lost, Alfred managed to keep both his head and the freedom of the Kingdom of Wessex, and, in turn, set the Anglo-Saxons on the path to eventual victory over the Vikings and the long road to the formation of a unified English nation.



Alfred

It must be noted that Alfred was only given the epithet, 'The Great' in the 16th century.

In September 825 AD, The Anglo-Saxons of Mercia and Wessex clashed at the battle of Ellendun. Mercia, under their King Beornwulf, was the most powerful of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms yet they fell to defeat at Ellendun, in what must be considered one of the most important battles in English history. Wessex, led by King Ecgberht (The grandfather of Alfred) the victory of the West Saxons allowed them to seize the Mercian client kingdoms of Kent, Essex and Sussex and to defeat the Britons of Cornwall. Mercia would never again be able to dominate any of the Southern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and their defeat at Ellendun encouraged the East Anglians to re-establish their own independence from Mercia.

In 929 AD, Ecgberht and the West Saxons occupied Mercia and the King then received an acknowledgement of his supremacy by the kingdom of Northumbria, which in reality, made him the overlord of what we now know as England.

Early years

Alfred was born in either late 848 or 849 AD. His parents were King Æthelwulf and his wife, Osburh. He was the youngest of his six siblings. Three of his brothers would subsequently become Kings of Wessex.

By the early 9th century, virtually all of what we now call England was controlled by Anglo-Saxons. Wessex and Mercia had become allies after Ellendun.

In 835 AD, Alfred's Grandfather, Ecgberht experienced at first hand that the Vikings would now become a major threat. They raided the Isle of Sheppey and the following year; they inflicted a defeat on the West Saxons at the battle of Carhampton. Ecgberht had his revenge in 838 when he defeated an alliance of Cornishmen and Vikings at the battle of Hingston Down.

Alfred's father, Æthelwulf and his son Æthelstan were defeated by the Vikings in 843 at the second battle of Carhampton but in 850, Æthelstan defeated the Vikings in the first recorded naval battle fought off the English coast at Sandwich.

Æthelwulf and his second son, Æthelbald, duly inflicted a huge defeat on the Vikings at the battle of Aclea, the following year.

As Alfred grew up, he was sent on a pilgrimage to Rome, where he was confirmed by Pope Leo IV. Alfred also spent some time at the Court of the Frankish King, Charles the Bald.

In 865, The Great Heathen Army made its first appearance in England. Alfred was 16 years old. In that same year, Alfred's 18-year-old brother, Æthelred was crowned King of Wessex.

In 870, the Vikings arrived on the borders of Wessex. The war for the last independent Anglo-Saxon Kingdom had begun.

Nine battles

Nine battles would be fought in the following year. Two of these battles are neither dated or named but on the 31st of December 870 the Saxons defeated the Vikings at the battle of Englefield. On the 5th of January, the Saxons suffered a major defeat when attempting to attack the Great Army at Reading.

On the 9th of January, The Saxons defeated the Vikings at the battle of Ashdown. The armies clashed again on the 22nd of January at Basing. The Vikings were victorious as they were again on the 22nd of March at the battle of Mertun.

871

In the April of 871, King Æthelred died, possibly of wounds from an earlier battle and Alfred was crowned King.

One of the un-named battles then took place which resulted in a defeat for the Saxons. Alfred was not present at this battle but he did lead a Saxon army against the Vikings at the battle of Wilton in May, 871.

This clash too, resulted in another victory for the Vikings.

Following this defeat, Alfred was forced to make peace with the Vikings. Details of any treaty are unknown but it would appear that the Vikings did agree to leave Alfred's Kingdom. It's not known if they were paid to leave but one reason may be, is that the number of battles may have depleted Viking manpower and that they were unable to replace the numbers of men lost. Either way, the peace would not last for long.

The Viking army moved to and occupied London, which was under Mercian control. Over the course of the following five years the Vikings occupied a number of eastern regions of England, especially in what is now East Anglia. They were now led by three powerful leaders, Guthrum, Anwend and Oscetel.

876

In 876, The Vikings broke the peace and their army attacked and occupied Wareham in Dorset. Alfred laid siege to the town but was unable to storm the town. Another peace agreement was made in which hostages were exchanged by each side. As was often the case, the Vikings did not adhere to the agreements and murdered the Saxon hostages and then managed to escape by sea. They made their way to Exeter which they occupied.

Alfred's army followed them and again blocked escape from the city on the landward side whilst Alfred's fleet blockaded the Viking fleet in the harbour. A Viking seaborne relief fleet was destroyed in a storm and the invaders were forced to sue for peace. Alfred allowed them to withdraw to Mercia. Again, we do not know the reasons as to why he permitted this, given the Viking tendency not to honour any treaties. It would prove to be a near fatal error on Alfred's part.

12th Night

On 12th night, just after Christmas 878, Alfred and his family were at their Royal Villa at Chippenham, when the Vikings attacked. Virtually all of Alfred's retinue were slaughtered but he managed to escape with a small band, which included his family, namely his wife Ealhswith, and his children, Aethelflaed and Edward. (The future King, Edward the Elder and the father of Athelstan).

They took refuge in the Somerset marshes at a place called Athelney. From this refuge, Alfred continued Anglo-Saxon resistance against the Vikings. All the other Anglo-Saxons Kingdoms had fallen. Wessex was alone and defeat look certain.

It was whilst Alfred was at Athelney that he supposedly burnt the cakes and was scolded by a peasant woman.

Athelney

Whilst at Athelney, Alfred began re-forming his army. Survivors made their way there and messengers were sent out into the countryside to let the people know that the King was still alive and that he planned to strike the Vikings.

Alfred summonsed the men of Somerset, Wiltshire and Hampshire to meet at Egbert's stone sometime between the 4th and 8th of May 878. The Fyrd of the three shires and his own retinue were now to challenge the Vikings in open battle at Eddington.

POSSIBLY EGBERT'S STONE. KINGSTONE DEVERILL. WILTSHIRE.



ALFRED'S TOWER, ANOTHER POSSIBLE LOCATION OF THE ORIGINAL SITE OF EGBERT'S STONE.

878

Between the 6th and 12th of May 878, the armies of the West Saxons and the Vikings clashed at Eddington or Ethandun. Little detail, as usual, is known but this time Alfred did win a total victory over the Vikings. The below is from Asser's Life of King Alfred.

"Fighting ferociously, forming a dense shield-wall against the whole army of the Pagans, and striving long and bravely...at last he [Alfred] gained the victory. He overthrew the Pagans with great slaughter, and smiting the fugitives, he pursued them as far as the fortress."

The battle's location is disputed but its more likely location is at Westbury in Wiltshire and Bratton Castle; an Iron Age hill fort was likely the fortress which the Vikings had used as their base.

BELOW. THE COMMEMORATIVE STONE FOR THE BATTLE OF EDDINGTON.



Aftermath

The surviving Vikings, including their leader, Guthrum, retreated to a fort at Chippenham. Alfred followed them and surrounded the fortress. The Vikings were trapped and faced starvation or destruction. After a few days they surrendered.

One of the conditions imposed on the Vikings was that Guthrum was to be baptised. Three weeks after the battle, King Guthrum and 29 of his men were duly baptised at the Royal stronghold of Wedmore. This was known as the 'peace of Wedmore'. Several years later this peace arrangement was ratified and is referred to as the Treaty of Wedmore.

Guthrum was allowed to settle in East Anglia and was given part of what was Eastern Mercia. The area would henceforth be called the 'Danelaw'. Guthrum took the Anglo-Saxon name of Athelstan.

Alfred also succeeded to rule Western Mercia after the Mercian King, Ceolwulf II was deposed.

Guthrum had been neutralised but the Viking threat remained a constant danger to Wessex. In 882, Alfred fought and defeated a small Viking fleet. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle mentions four naval battles in which Alfred fought in three of them. He is considered as the founder of the first English navy.

Viking armies continued to raid in the likes of Kent and Alfred was kept alert to this threat.

In 889, Guthrum died and this opened up the Danelaw to further Viking incursions. The following decade would test Alfred to the hilt.

893 or 894

In 893 or 894 two Viking armies landed in England. They occupied Appledore and Milton in Kent. The army based at Milton was led by the notorious Hastein. Alfred mobilised his army and kept watch on the Kentish border. The army at Appledore broke out and headed into Surrey. Alfred's son, Edward was sent after them and he engaged and defeated them at the battle of Farnham in 982 AD. The surviving Vikings retreated to Essex, where they were attacked and defeated by the Saxons at the battle of Benfleet.

Hastein had moved his army to a camp at Shoeburyness, also in Essex. This was a large encampment and contained many women and children. The Viking fleet had been drawn up on the beach. The Saxons attacked and overwhelmed the encampment. The Viking fleet was burnt and many captives were taken, however, the slippery Hastein escaped with a large force of warriors.

Hastein

Hastein, made his way into the Thames Valley but was met by The Ealdormen of Somerset, Mercia and Wiltshire with their Fyrd. Hastein fled eastwards and was followed by the Saxon army.

Whilst this was taking place, Alfred took an army to Exeter which was under siege by another Viking force. Alfred raised the siege and the surviving Vikings fled.

Hastein and his army had been chased into the Welsh borders where they were eventually brought to bay at Buttington, just outside of present-day Welshpool. At the battle of Buttington, most of the Vikings were slaughtered but Hastein, escaped again.

(THERE IS A SEPARATE ARTICLE ON THE BATTLE OF BUTTINGTON ON THIS WEBSITE)

As can be seen, Alfred had very little peace during his reign but his perseverance and the reforms he implemented would bring about victory for Wessex in what we call the first Viking war, though his son and daughter, Edward and Aethelflaed would continue to battle various Viking incursions. Alfred reformed and reorganised the Military, making it an effective and deadly fighting force, he introduced the system of fortifications known as burhs, reformed education and founded Oxford University as well as building an effective navy. Introduced legal reforms and taxation, encouraged religious reform and advocated that education and church services should be conducted in English.

Death of Alfred

Alfred died on the 26th of October 889. He was either 50 or 51 years old. Throughout his life he had suffered a painful illness. The symptoms described suggest that he may have suffered from Crohn's disease or severe haemorrhoids. He was buried in the old Minster in Winchester, but his remains were later transferred to the new Minster. Following the Norman conquest, Alfred and his family were re-interred at Hyde Abbey. In 1536, Hyde Abbey was a victim of the dissolution and the Abbey was demolished. In the 1788 a prison was constructed on the site during which the stone coffins of Alfred and his family were exposed. The coffins were destroyed and the bones were scattered. This account was recorded by the local Catholic priest.

Thus, the miscreants couch amidst the ashes of our Alfred's and Edwards; and where once religious silence and contemplation were only interrupted by the bell of regular observance, the chanting of devotion, now alone resound the clank of the captive's chains and the oaths of the profligate! In digging for the foundation of that mournful edifice, at almost every stroke of the mattock or spade some ancient sepulchre was violated, the venerable contents of which were treated with marked indignity. On this occasion a great number of stone coffins were dug up, with a variety of other curious articles, such as chalices, patens, rings, buckles, the leather of shoes and boots, velvet and gold lace belonging to chasubles and other vestments; as also the crook, rims, and joints of a beautiful crosier double gilt.

Pelvis Discovery

In January 2011, part of a male pelvic bone was discovered. Carbon 14 dating placed the age of the bone to the period of Alfred the Great. It is believed that these remains are either of Alfred or his son, Edward the Elder but as to how this may be verified is an issue that has not yet been overcome.

IS THIS PELVIC BONE PART OF THE REMAINS OF ALFRED THE GREAT OR EDWARD THE ELDER?



THIS SHORT ARTICLE DOES NOT DO JUSTICE TO ALFRED OF WESSEX BUT IT MAY INSPIRE YOU TO RESEARCH MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS REMARKABLE KING.