

# ALFRED THE GREAT

## The Reformer King (849 – 901)

King Alfred of Wessex spent most of his life fighting against the invading Danes and he is the only king in English history to be known as “*The Great*.” His reign has been recognized as one of the most important turning points in English political and ecclesiastical history. He lived through tumultuous times and is recognized as one of the most intelligent, devout, industrious and effective of all medieval monarchs

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**A**lfred was soldier and scholar, lawmaker and educator, author and Reformer. He was born the fourth son of Aethelwulf and Osburh at Wantage in 849. His mother taught him a love for knowledge, and at a young age he responded to her challenge that whichever of her children first learned to read a beautifully illuminated Saxon book of poetry should have it for his own.

Alfred dedicated himself to the task and won the prize. This was characteristic of his entire life's love for literature, hunger for knowledge and passion for advancing English literature. As the fourth son of the king, it was not expected that Alfred would ever come to rule; however, the death of his brother, Aethelred, in battle against the Danes, propelled Alfred to the throne.

For most of his thirty years' reign he was a soldier king who led his people in a desperate war for survival. Alfred personally commanded in 54 pitched battles, frequently fighting against overwhelming odds. In just the first five months of 870 he fought 9 pitched battles against the Danish Vikings. Alfred was defeated at Reading, and a few days later turned this defeat into victory at Ashdown. The Battle of Ashdown in January 878 was critically important. As Winston Churchill describes it: “*If the West Saxons had been beaten all England would have sunk into heathen anarchy. Since they were victorious the hope still burned for a civilized Christian existence in this Island. This was the first time the invaders had been beaten in the field.*”

There was an inconclusive battle at Basing, followed by a defeat at Marston. It was at this battle that his brother, Aethelred, died and Alfred succeeded to the throne. Shortly after this he fought the Danes to a standstill at Wilton, but the result of the battle was indecisive. Alfred and the men of Wessex had proven too stubborn a foe for easy subjugation so their resistance secured five uneasy years of peace in which to consolidate.

In the uneasy peace that followed, he reorganised his army and started to rebuild his realm which had suffered under the merciless ravages of the Danish Vikings. Many towns and villages were raided and plundered; London had fallen to the Danes; and Northumbria and East Angliawere firmly under Danish control.

Alfred realized that it was vital to create a navy to effectively defend England from the seafaring Danes. To be safe in an island it was necessary to command the sea. He contracted the Frisian seamen to build a fleet superior to any that had previously been seen. For building up the English navy from very small beginnings, **Alfred has justly been called: "The Father of the English Navy."**

Alfred also instilled a great respect for law and order in his kingdom and it was said that a traveller might hang a valuable jewel on a bush by the roadside and nobody would dare touch it. Alfred brought scholars from Europe in order to help educate his people. He was determined to give his nation a stable system of laws based upon God's Law. He blended Mosaic law with the Sermon on the Mount and Germanic customs. **Alfred's Dooms began with the Ten Commandments, the Laws of Moses, the Golden Rule of Christ and other biblical principles.**

In 876 the Danes launched a surprise offensive, seized Wareham, besieged and took Exeter, and, rounding by sea, landed in Devon, then besieged Kenwith Castle. When they captured Kenwith they put all the inhabitants to the sword. Alfred was defeated at the battle of Chippenham, and forced to retreat. Wessex seemed to be in danger of falling under the shadow of Odin's bird (the great raven which the Danes took as their symbol).

Alfred's defeated forces withdrew to the Isle of Athelney, amidst the forests and marshes of Somerset. It was here that the well-known event of Alfred burning the housewife's cakes took place. Seeking shelter while on the move, he was asked by his hostess to watch her cakes which were being baked. Absorbed in thought, planning his strategies to counter attack the Danes, Alfred failed to notice the blackened cakes he was meant to be watching and was berated by the irate housewife when she returned.

After reorganizing his forces, Alfred surprised the Danes after force marching his soldiers at up to 40 miles a day. The Battle of Edington, in Wiltshire, was a decisive victory for him. The area is still known as Slaughterford and on the hillside above this decisive battlefield is a great white horse, which Alfred had cut out to commemorate this major victory. Alfred also forced King Guthrum of the Danes, along with 30 of his earls, to be baptized as Christians. These were the first Viking converts to Christianity.

The Danes withdrew from Alfred's territory until 884 when they attempted another invasion. This time Alfred gained a swift victory, seizing London in 885 and fortifying it strongly. Thereafter, he received the submission of the leaders of the Angles and the Saxons and from several princes of Wales. At this point, Alfred became in effect the first king over all of England.

In 892 a large invasion of Danes was met in battle. Alfred defeated the invaders at Farnham in 893. Again at Thorney and Benfleet, he out-manoevred and out-fought them. Then, hearing of a second Danish army besieging Exeter, he force marched his army and drove out the besiegers. At this point, his newly-formed English navy attacked the galleys of the invading Danes at sea and defeated them. As a large army of Danes marched up the Thames valley, numerous fierce battles ensued. The Danish garrison at Chester was besieged and forced to retreat in 894. To prevent the Danes re-supplying their forces Alfred obstructed the Thames River, forcing them to withdraw. By 896 he had driven the invaders out of his kingdom.

Through virtue and valour, tactics and tenacity, Alfred had fought the Viking invaders to a standstill and turned them back out of his country. He succeeded in uniting the fragmented dominions of England against a common foe. His Christian courage was an inspiration to all. Alfred enjoyed over 32 years in marriage to Ealhswith – of the royal family of Mercia. They raised three daughters and two sons. (His son Edward and daughter Elhelfleda “*The Lady of the Mercians*” together defeated the Danes and liberated all England.)

Now, having rescued his country from invasion, he set to work reforming the laws, customs and culture of his people. He personally translated many Latin works into Anglo-Saxon so that the English people could read them. **Amongst his many translation projects were Bede’s Ecclesiastical History, Orosius’ Universal History, Gregory’s Pastoral Theology, Aesop’s Fables, Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy and the Psalms of David. Alfred was also the author of many original titles, including a book against unjust judges.**

**Alfred desired that every Englishman learn to read, and so he devised a plan for the general education of the people. He donated half of his personal income to church schools.** Alfred taught that for a kingdom to be effective, it needed men of prayer, men of war and men of work. He insisted that his nobles learn to read, and learn the great history and heritage of Christendom.

King Alfred wrote: “*Local government ought to be synonymous with local Christian virtue, otherwise it becomes local tyranny, local corruption and local iniquity.*” He founded two monasteries and numerous schools. His charities were numerous. He received and cared for foreigners and strangers in his court and allocated 1/8th of his revenue to the poor and needy. He instituted a system of fortified posts (burgs) and established a national militia (the *fyrd*) ensuring that the common people were armed, trained and organised for local defence. Alfred enlarged and improved the English fleet. He also entrenched and enforced the Law of God as the Common Law of England. Historians have noted that while the world has had other examples of kings who have been great generals or great magistrates, no other sovereign did more in battle, in rule making, in forming and developing the literature and education of their people, as well as working for the spiritual benefit of both subjects and enemies. Winston Churchill marvels that Alfred should have wished “*to convert these savage foes... This sublime power to rise above the whole force of circumstances, to remain unbiased by the extremes of victory or defeat, to persevere in the teeth of disaster, to greet returning fortune with a cool eye, to have faith in men after repeated betrayals, raises Alfred far above the turmoil of barbaric wars to his pinnacle of deathless victory.*”

Edmund Burke wrote of Alfred: “*one cannot help being amazed that a prince who lived in such turbulent times, who commanded personally in 54 pitched battles, who had so disordered a province to regulate, who was not only a legislator but a judge, and who was continually superintending his armies, his navies, the traffic of his kingdom, his revenues and the conduct of all his officers, could have bestowed so much of his time on religious exercises and speculative knowledge, but the exertion of all his faculties and virtues seems to have given mutual strength to all of them.*”

“*Happy are the people whose God is the LORD*” Psalm 144:15

King Alfred stands out as the model king, the perfect knight, a dedicated Christian, a Protestant before Protestantism, soldier and scholar, rule maker and educator, author and Reformer. He successfully fought against spiritual decay within the English church as well as against the Viking invaders, creating the first English navy, authored English literature, ensured the survival of Christianity in England, and began the great process of converting the bloodthirsty Viking invaders to Christianity.

*"Blessed be the Lord my Rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle – my loving kindness and my fortress, my high tower and my Deliverer, my shield and the One in whom I take refuge, who subdues the people under me... Stretch out Your hand from above; rescue me and deliver me out of great waters, from the hands of foreigners... the One who gives salvation to kings, who delivers David his servant from the deadly sword... Happy are the people whose God is the Lord!" (Psalm 144:1-2, 7, 10, 15).*

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