

The Vikings and Danes arrive in Britain

As we know the Vikings were fond of travelling the seas discovering new places. Britain was very close to Norway, Sweden and Denmark from where they came from. In the year 792 A.D. three Viking ships appeared off the coast of Dorset. They were manned by tall, fierce, fair haired warriors armed with long spears and two headed battle-axes. They leapt ashore, raided the nearest village, killed anyone who opposed them, and then put to sea again. This was typical of a Viking raid. Soon the Vikings captured the Orkney and Shetland islands off the coast of Scotland and for many years used them as bases from which to attack Ireland and England. These raids normally took place in the Spring, Summer and Autumn. As Winter approached, the Vikings would return to their bases.

Then in the year 865 A.D. things changed for the worse. A Dane called Ivar the Boneless invaded East Anglia with a huge army. This time they had come to stay for good. In 867 A.D. a large Viking army under the command of Ingwar and Halfden arrived in Northumbria. The original seven Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms had now be reduced to four larger Kingdoms; Mercia, East Anglia, Northumbria and Wessex. The Anglo-Saxons were no match for the Vikings and Danes and gradually over the next few years Mercia, Northumbria and East Anglia were conquered. Only Wessex held out, and in 871 A.D. King Ethelred and his brother Alfred defeated the Danes at the Battle of Ashdown.

King Ethelred died shortly after the battle and Alfred became King of Wessex. Alfred was a very clever man and realised it was only a matter of time before the Vikings returned to attack Wessex.

King Alfred the Great (871-901)

Alfred was right and not long after the Battle of Ashdown, the Danes once again invaded Wessex. Alfred and his army were caught unprepared and Alfred managed to escape to an area called the Isle of Athelney, a very marshy area in Somerset that was very difficult to get in and out of unless you knew the secret paths.

While he was hiding in the Isle of Athelney, Alfred decided to carry out plans about how to defeat the Danes. He organised an army and attacked a very surprised Danish army at Eddington (Ethandune) in 878. A.D. The Danes were defeated and they leader Guthrum had to make peace with Alfred. This peace was called the Treaty of Wedmore. Guthrum agreed to

- Accept Alfred as his overlord,
- Become a Christian and change his name to Athelstan.
- England was divided into two parts. The North and the East were given to the Danes and was called **Danelaw** and the South and West remained under Alfred's rule.

Alfred was no fool and realised that things could change if Guthrum died.

The Army

The first thing he had to do was to raise a strong army. He passed a law that said that all the men in Wessex had to fight in Alfred's army for six months a year. However they did all have to join at the same time and so there was always somebody at home to look after the villages and fields. This new army was called the 'Fyrd'. Alfred also decided that he needed full time professional soldiers who were trained to fight to the highest standards. He selected special men and made them his personal bodyguard called 'Housecarls'. These Housecarls were fierce fighters who would fight to the death in defence of Alfred and Wessex. They rode to battle on ponies, then dismounted and fought with spears and a giant two handed sword or axe.

The Navy

Alfred believed that he needed a navy to attack the Danes before they could land and therefore he ordered many ships to be built. For this reason Alfred is sometimes called the "Father of the Navy"

Reinforcing Towns.

Alfred ordered the strengthening of town walls and even had some new strong forts built. These were called 'Burghs'

Alfred's work was very successful and he soon made Wessex a safer place to live and for a while the Danes left Wessex alone. Now that Wessex was peaceful Alfred decided to put some more of his plans into action.

Alfred's other achievements.

Law and Order

Alfred realised that it was important that people behaved themselves and that people were protected from wrong doers. It was also important that wrong doers were treated fairly and punished if necessary. Alfred had a look at all the old laws. Some which he thought were good he kept, others he set aside. He then issued a completely new set of laws for Wessex.

Education

Alfred always enjoyed reading and studying and he thought it very important. He therefore invited Scholars from all over Europe to come to Wessex and educate the children of his nobles and to help educate the monks and churchmen.

Monasteries

The Monks spent a lot of time looking after the poor and sick and educating children. Alfred ordered many more monasteries to be built.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

Alfred wanted a history of England to be written. He asked some monks to write a diary beginning right back to about 60 B.C. when the Anglo-Saxons believed Julius Caesar invaded Britain. The monks used legends, stories, manuscripts and even invented some of the stories.

Candle Clock

Alfred is believed to have invented the candle clock. This was a painted candle of alternate black and white bands. Each band took an hour to burn.

Sadly Alfred died in 901 A.D. He was the first King to devote his entire life to ensuring that his people were properly looked after. After great men have died people often make up stories about them. Do you remember Arthur? In one of these myths Alfred was hiding in the Isle of Athelney when he came across a hut in a wood. Apparently the hut was lived in by a swineherd and his evil wife, neither of whom realised who their guest was. One day, Alfred was told to look after some cakes that were baking in the oven. Alfred forgot and when the wife returned the cakes had burnt. The wife was so angry with Alfred that she hit him with her stick.

Another famous story tells of Alfred disguising himself as a minstrel and entering Guthrum's camp to find out their plans. Having stayed there a few days he returned to his hiding place, gathered his army and attacked and defeated the Danes.