

How Great Was Alfred the 'Great'?

Alfred was the King of Wessex from 871 – 899. Now we call him Alfred the Great. No other English King or Queen has been called 'great'. So, who was Alfred? Why was he so great?

Alfred was the son of King Aethelwulf of the West Saxons. He was the youngest son and so would not normally expect to be a future king. However, at the time of his birth, England was weak. The Anglo-Saxons kingdoms were under constant attack from the Vikings. The King said that all of his sons should be ready to defend and lead the kingdom.

Alfred and his brother fought the Vikings many times. The Battle of Ashdown in 871 is one famous battle. The Vikings had sailed up the River Thames. They had taken the town of Reading from the Anglo-Saxons. Now they were getting ready to attack again. The Anglo-Saxon army was made up of farmers. They were not professional soldiers. They did not have weapons to match the Vikings. The Vikings were strong and vicious. They were also uphill. This gave them an advantage in battle. The battle was fierce and long. Somehow, it was Alfred's army who triumphed.

When Alfred's brother died, Alfred became King of Wessex. He realised that he could not win against the Vikings. He would not be able to push them out of England. Therefore, in 886 he made a treaty with his enemy. England was carved in two. The north-east of England became a Viking Kingdom called Danelaw. Alfred controlled the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms of West Mercia and Kent.

The treaty finally brought peace to England. King Alfred turned his focus to building a strong Kingdom. He made sure it was well protected. He organised the army and created a new navy so that his Kingdom could defend itself from attack by the sea. He built forts and roads to connect them. This made travel easier. Alfred also wanted to improve learning. Books were translated into the Anglo-Saxon language so that more people could read them. He supported a new 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle' to keep records of



important events. These records have helped historians learn about what was happening in England. King Alfred made laws and set up an education system. He united the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms for the first time. By the time he died in 899, he was not just called King of Wessex, but also King of the English.

RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. What was the name of Alfred's father?
2. What town had the Vikings taken before the Battle of Ashdown?
3. When was the treaty between King Alfred and the Vikings agreed?
4. What was the name of the Viking kingdom in Britain?
5. What is the name of the records that Historians use to find out about the Anglo-Saxon times?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

V

Which word tells us that Alfred won at the Battle of Ashdown?

S

Why was it a surprise that Alfred won at the Battle of Ashdown?

V

What is a treaty?

E

What picture does the writer paint of the Vikings in this text? Why might this be?

S

Summarise in your own words the reasons that Alfred is called Alfred the Great?