



HISTORY MYSTERIES

Was Alfred the Great really all that great?

Stone Age	Bronze Age	Iron Age	Romans	Anglo-Saxons	Medieval	Tudors	Stuarts	English Commonwealth	Stuarts (again)	Georgians	Victorians	Edwardians	World War I	Inter-War Period	World War II	Cold War	Modern
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Alfred the Great was born in AD849, the youngest son of Aethelwulf, King of Wessex, an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in the South of England. Three of Alfred's older brothers had also been king of Wessex before him, but had all died without adult **heirs**, so it was Alfred who became king in AD871. He reigned for twenty-eight years, dying in AD899.

Alfred is one of the only British **monarchs** to be known as 'the Great' - but why? What exactly did he do that was so great?

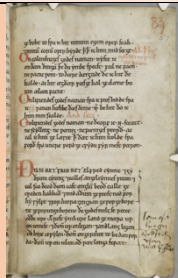
Source A

Alfred made good laws and believed education was important. He had books translated from Latin into English, so people could read them. He also told monks to begin writing the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. To help protect his kingdom from Viking attacks, Alfred built forts and walled towns known as 'burhs'. He also built warships to guard the coast from raiders and organised his army into two parts. While half the men were at home on their farms, the rest were ready to fight **Vikings**.

From BBC Bitesize - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/zxsbcdm/articles/z9tdq6f#zhxv3j6>

Source B

The **Treaty** of Alfred and Guthrum was signed around AD880. It agreed to divide England between the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons.

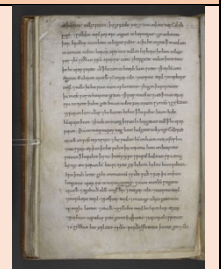


Source C

King Alfred asked monks to start writing the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which is one of the most important **primary sources** for historians studying this period.

Available online via the British Library -

<https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2016/02/anglo-saxon-chronicles-now-online.html>



Source D



ELFRED EDREX (King Alfred)



LV DONIA (London)

These coins show that King Alfred was in control of London, which wasn't in the Kingdom of Wessex.

From the Royal Mint Museum - <https://www.royalmintmuseum.org.uk/collection/coins/alfred-the-great-penny/#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20coins%20most,but%20nonetheless%20full%20of%20personality.>

Source E

Alfred the Great, King of Wessex, a defender against Viking invasion and a **social reformer**; just few of the reasons why he is the only English monarch to be known as "the Great". Alfred was born in 849 and served as King of Wessex, a Saxon kingdom based in the southwest of modern-day England, from 871 to his death on 26th October 899 AD. In this time, he ruled successfully over his Anglo-Saxon kingdom and emerged as a military force, a strong leader and a promoter of reforms. His most important achievement was to prevent an island-wide invasion from the Danes and establish a united Anglo-Saxon culture.

Jessica Brain, 'Alfred the Great' - <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Alfred-the-Great/>

Source F

It is often **erroneously** thought that King Alfred of Wessex not only defeated the Vikings but was the first king of England. He was in fact the last king of the English kingdoms. His victory over the Vikings was without doubt an astonishing achievement but Alfred's military victories were only the beginning, since he spent 20 years winning the peace. Alfred held the line against the Vikings but remained what he had always been - king of Wessex. His achievements laid the foundations for his grandson Aethelstan to conquer the Viking territories and declare the first Kingdom of all England, in 927, a generation after Alfred's death in 899.

Toby Purser, 'Alfred of Wessex and the Making of England' - <https://pure.northampton.ac.uk/en/activities/alfred-of-wessex-and-the-making-of-england>

Source G



Statue of Alfred in Winchester, completed in 1901

Source H

Many towns claim to have been founded by Alfred as part of his plan for defending England. This idea rests largely on a text known as the Burghal Hidage, which lists the names of 33 strongholds (in Old English *burhs*) across southern England.

Over the past 40 years, much **archaeological evidence** has been gathered about the Burghal Hidage strongholds, many of which were former Roman towns or Iron Age hill forts that were reused or refurbished as Anglo-Saxon military sites. Others were new burhs raised with an innovative design that imitated the regular Roman plan.

It has been argued that these burhs represent an "Alfredian" vision of **urban planning**. But the evidence doesn't entirely bear this out. For example, in Winchester radiocarbon and archaeomagnetic dating suggests the new urban plan was probably built around 840–80, almost certainly, therefore, before Alfred's victory of 878 and probably before he even became king. Excavations in Worcester, by contrast, show that the distinctive "Alfredian" street plan there only came into use in the late tenth or early 11th century, around 100 years after Alfred's death.

Stuart Brookes, 'New research indicates that Alfred the Great probably wasn't that great' -

<https://theconversation.com/new-research-indicates-that-alfred-the-great-probably-wasnt-that-great-74464>



What do YOU think?

Glossary

heir - the person who has the right to someone's title or property after their death

monarch - a king or a queen

Vikings - a group of people from what is now Denmark, Norway and Sweden, who invaded England many times during the Anglo-Saxon period

treaty - the agreement that ends a war

primary source - information used by historians that was created at the time of the period they are studying

social reformer - someone who wants to change society for the better

erroneously - incorrectly

archaeological evidence - evidence found by archaeologists by studying remains from the past

urban planning - a plan for building a city or town

004 Alfred the Great

Further Reading:

The Genius of the Anglo-Saxons by Izzy Howell

Alfred the Great and the Anglo Saxons by David Gill

History Makers: Alfred the Great by Claire Thorp