

King Alfred resists the Vikings

Alfred was the only king to hold out against the Viking invasion. But even he was only able to hold on to half of England.

In the ninth century, the Anglo-Saxon rule of England faced its most severe challenge. The shores of England were being attacked by **VIKINGS**. An important source for the history of this time is the **ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLES**.

Viking raids

The Vikings raided the coast in just the same way that the Anglo-Saxons had raided the coast some four centuries earlier (picture ②).

For half a century, they raided and then they invaded. They quickly overwhelmed the people along the eastern coast.

They succeeded because they were better at fighting than the Anglo-Saxons. It was also impossible for the defenders to know where they were going to attack and so muster (gather) an army to beat them.

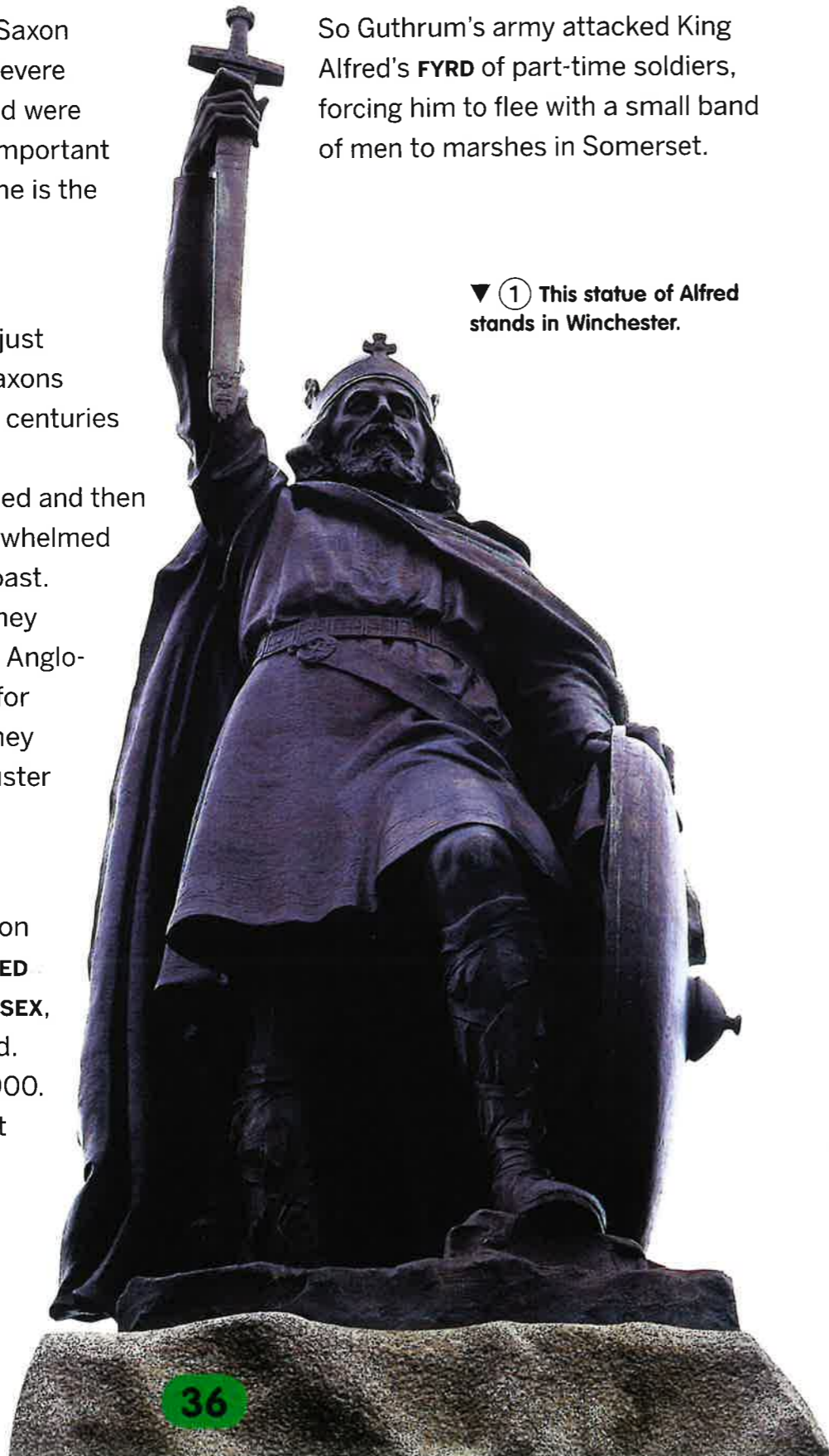
The Danes beat Alfred

The strongest of the Anglo-Saxon kings in this age was King **ALFRED** (picture ①). His kingdom, **WESSEX**, lay in the south-west of England. He was king between 871 and 900.

The Danish Vikings brought over a large army led by King Guthrum. Guthrum knew he had to defeat Alfred if he was to get control of the country.

So Guthrum's army attacked King Alfred's **FYRD** of part-time soldiers, forcing him to flee with a small band of men to marshes in Somerset.

▼ ① This statue of Alfred stands in Winchester.



▲ ② Vikings raiding the eastern coast of Anglo-Saxon England.

Alfred regains his lands

Alfred, however, was not defeated. He, in turn, made many hit-and-run raids on the Danes. At the same time, he gradually mustered a strong army.

In 878, Alfred struck back and defeated the Danes at the Battle of Edington.

After the battle, Alfred, now called Alfred the Great, regained the kingdom of Wessex.

Alfred's fame among the English was so great that a Welsh monk named Asser wrote his biography (life story). This is also an important record of the history of the times (see extract opposite).

In his biography of King Alfred, Asser wrote about the Battle of Edington. He uses the word 'pagans' to mean the Vikings.

"King Alfred came to a place called Edington, and with a close shield wall fought fiercely against the whole army of the pagans; his attack was long and spirited, and finally by divine aid he triumphed and overthrew the pagans with a very great slaughter.

"He pursued them, killing them as they fled up to the stronghold, where he seized all that he found outside – men, horses and cattle – slaying the men at once; and before the gates of the pagan fortress he boldly encamped with his whole army.

"And when he had stayed there fourteen days and the pagans had known the horrors of famine, cold, fear, and at last of despair, they sought a peace by which the king was to take from them as many named hostages as he wished while he gave none to them...

"When the king heard their message he was moved to pity, and of his own accord received from them such designated hostages as he wished. In addition to this, after the hostages were taken, the pagans took oath that they would most speedily leave his kingdom..."