

Childhood

Alfred was born in the village of Wanating, now Wantage, Oxfordshire. He was the youngest son of King Æthelwulf of Wessex

In 853, at the age of four, Alfred is reported to have been sent to Rome, where he was confirmed by Pope Leo IV, who "anointed him as king". However nobody thought he would become King as he had three living elder brothers. When he was older Alfred accompanied his father on a pilgrimage to Rome, where he spent some time at the court of Charles the Bald, King of the Franks, around 854–855.

On their return from Rome in 856, Æthelwulf was deposed by his son Æthelbald. With civil war looming, the important men met to find a compromise. Æthelbald would keep the western shires (i.e. historical Wessex), and Æthelwulf would rule in the east. When King Æthelwulf died in 858, Wessex was ruled by three of Alfred's brothers in succession: Æthelbald, Æthelberht and Æthelred.^[6]

Bishop Asser tells the story of how as a child Alfred won as a prize a book of Saxon poems, offered by his mother to the first of her children able to memorize it.

Legend also has it that the young Alfred spent time in Ireland seeking healing. Alfred was troubled by health problems throughout his life. It is thought that he may have suffered from Crohn's disease.

Statues of Alfred in Winchester and Wantage portray him as a great warrior. Evidence suggests he was not physically strong, and though not lacking in courage, he was noted more for his intellect than as a warlike character.

Reigns of Alfred's brothers

During the short reigns of the older two of his three elder brothers, Æthelbald of Wessex and Æthelberht of Wessex, Alfred is not mentioned. An army of Danes had landed in East Anglia with the intent of conquering the four kingdoms that constituted Anglo-Saxon England in 865. It was with the backdrop of a rampaging Viking army that Alfred's public life began, with the accession of his third brother, Æthelred of Wessex, in 865.

During this period, Bishop Asser applied to Alfred the unique title of *secundarius*, a recognised successor closely associated with the reigning monarch. This arrangement may have been sanctioned by Alfred's father, or by the Witan, to guard against the danger of a disputed succession should Æthelred fall in battle.

Fighting the Viking invasion

In 868, Alfred is recorded as fighting beside Æthelred in an unsuccessful attempt to keep the Great Heathen Army, led by Ivar the Boneless, out of the adjoining Kingdom of Mercia.

At the end of 870, the Danes arrived in his homeland. The year which followed has been called "Alfred's year of battles". Nine battles were fought, with varying outcomes, though the places and dates of two of these battles have not been recorded.

In Berkshire, a successful skirmish at the Battle of Englefield on 31 December 870 was followed by a severe defeat at the siege and Battle of Reading by Ivar's brother Halfdan Ragnarsson on 5 January 871.

Four days later, the Anglo-Saxons won a brilliant victory at the Battle of Ashdown on the Berkshire Downs, possibly near Compton or Aldworth. Alfred is particularly credited with the success of this last battle.

Later that month, on 22 January, the Saxons were defeated at the Battle of Basing. They were defeated again on 22 March at the Battle of Merton (perhaps Marden in Wiltshire or Martin in Dorset). Æthelred died shortly afterwards on 23 April.

King at war

Early struggles, defeat and flight

In April 871, King Æthelred died, and Alfred succeeded to the throne of Wessex and the burden of its defence, even though Æthelred left two under-age sons, Æthelhelm and Æthelwold. This was in accordance with the agreement that Æthelred and Alfred had made earlier that year in an assembly at *Swinbeorg*.

The Viking army withdrew from Reading in the autumn of 871 to take up winter quarters in Mercian London. Although not mentioned by Asser or by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Alfred probably also paid the Vikings cash to leave,

In 876 under their new leader, Guthrum, the Danes slipped past the Saxon army and attacked and occupied Wareham in Dorset. Alfred blockaded them but was unable to take Wareham by assault.^[1] Accordingly, he negotiated a peace which involved an exchange of hostages and oaths, which the Danes swore on a "holy ring" associated with the worship of Thor. The Danes broke their word and, after killing all the hostages, slipped away under cover of night to Exeter in Devon.

Alfred blockaded the Viking ships in Devon, and with a relief fleet having been scattered by a storm, the Danes were forced to submit. The Danes withdrew to Mercia. In January 878, the Danes made a sudden attack on Chippenham, a royal stronghold in which Alfred had been staying over Christmas, "and most of the people they killed, except the King Alfred, and he with a little band made his way by wood and swamp, and after Easter he made a fort at Athelney in the marshes of Somerset, and from that fort kept fighting against the foe". From his fort at Athelney, an island in the marshes near North Petherton, Alfred was able to mount an effective resistance movement, rallying the local militias from Somerset, Wiltshire and Hampshire.

A legend, originating from 12th century chronicles, tells how when he first fled to the Somerset Levels, Alfred was given shelter by a peasant woman who, unaware of his identity, left him to watch some cakes she had left cooking on the fire. Preoccupied with the problems of his kingdom, Alfred accidentally let the cakes burn, and was roundly scolded by the woman upon her return.

878 was the low-water mark in the history of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. With all the other kingdoms having fallen to the Vikings, Wessex alone was still resisting.

Counter-attack and victory



King Alfred's Tower (1772) on the supposed site of *Egbert's Stone*, the mustering place before the Battle of Edington

In the seventh week after Easter (4–10 May 878), around Whitsuntide, Alfred rode to 'Egbert's Stone' east of Selwood, where he was met by "all the people of Somerset and of Wiltshire and of that part of Hampshire which is on this side of the sea (that is, west of Southampton Water), and they rejoiced to see him". Alfred's emergence from his marshland stronghold was part of a carefully planned offensive that entailed raising the fyrds of three shires. This meant not only that the king had retained the loyalty of ealdormen, royal reeves and king's thegns (who were charged with levying and leading these forces), but that they had maintained their positions of authority in these localities well enough to answer his summons to war. Alfred's actions also suggest a system of scouts and messengers.

Alfred won a decisive victory in the ensuing Battle of Edington which may have been fought near Westbury, Wiltshire. He then pursued the Danes to their stronghold at Chippenham and starved them into submission. One of the terms of the surrender was that Guthrum convert to Christianity. Three weeks later the Danish king and 29 of his chief men were baptised at Alfred's court at Aller, near Athelney, with Alfred receiving Guthrum as his spiritual son.