

England's Greatest Monarch, Doug Hayhoe, January 2023

England has been ruled by many good kings and queens in its history. But none has embodied so well the exemplary leadership qualities as the one this essay is about, Alfred the Great.

I was thankful that the Queen reached her Platinum Jubilee. And I was hoping she would still live another five years. Her unexpected passing soon after, therefore, made me quite sad. She had reigned for so long I couldn't remember singing God save the King! She was a good queen, faithfully serving her subjects while maintaining personal integrity. My grandparents respected and loved her, my parents also. My wife and I valued having her as queen, as did our children and grandchildren. Five generations of my immediate family were blessed by Queen Elizabeth.

Although Elizabeth II was the longest reigning English monarch, she may not be the greatest, however. Some websites put Elizabeth I before her, as well as Victoria. Others mention William the Conqueror, Richard I, and George V. My favourite is Alfred the Great. He was "the man who made England," as one biography describes him, by saving it from a total Viking conquest. He founded the royal navy, organized and fortified the cities, codified the civil law, and contributed greatly to education and the Christian faith, translating part of the Scriptures and other important books into Anglo-Saxon, the language of the people. When sixteenth century writers reflected on this, they decided to refer to him as "Alfred the Great," the only English monarch given this title!

When Alfred was a child, his mother promised a book of poetry to whichever son could recite it first. Although he was the youngest, Alfred won. This passion for learning stayed for life. He once said, "I cannot find anything better in man than that he know, and nothing worse than that he be ignorant" (Foster, 2011).

Alfred came to the throne of Wessex in 871, after his brothers died. The Vikings ruled the seas of northern Europe, as well as the east of England called The Danelaw (Figure 1). Only the south and west were ruled by Anglo-Saxons, and these were being attacked. Alfred had to hide for several years. But it was at this time that he figured out his ideas.

His first was to fortify all the cities in Wessex with roads to another city less than twenty miles away. Another was to divide men into pairs, so that while one was working the fields, the other was free to fight the Vikings. This gave him a standing army. A third was to develop a navy that could challenge the longboats of the Vikings.

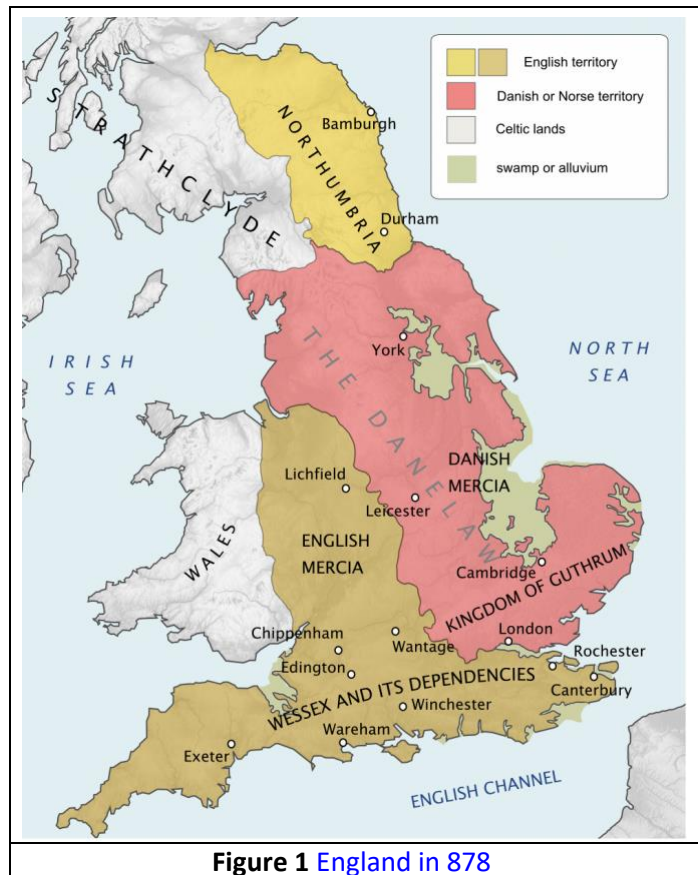


Figure 1 [England in 878](#)

The personal courage of King Alfred in his battles with the Vikings was at least as important as those three innovations. It was this that enabled him to win a decisive victory over the Vikings in 878, after a previous defeat, and to start to gain control of Mercia and Northumbria as well as Wessex. In fact, after one of his victories he persuaded the Viking leader, Guthrum, ruler of the southern part of The Danelaw, to undergo Christian baptism. With respect to this event, the historian Timothy Smith said, “Eleven hundred years ago Alfred and Guthrum made possible the creation of an English nation with a distinctly English culture” (Smith, 1978). Although all of England didn’t come into Anglo-Saxon control until the reign of Alfred’s grandson, it was his leadership that pushed back the Viking tide and secured England for the Anglo-Saxons.

Alfred was great not just because of his military victories and unification of England. He made key contributions to literacy, the Christian faith, and domestic laws. Although Christianity had arrived in England in the sixth century, by Alfred’s time few priests could read Latin. Naturally, then, little attention was being paid to the essential Christian documents. Alfred first encouraged the priests and other leaders to learn to read Latin, so that they could read the Scriptures and writings of the Church Fathers. When he saw that this wasn’t enough, he then commissioned scholars to translate these documents into Anglo-Saxon, the common language of the people. This aspect of King Alfred’s reign is sometimes overlooked by secular historians. Benjamin R Merkle, however, has emphasized it well in his 2009 biography, [*The White Horse King: The Life of Alfred the Great*](#).

What impressed me was the way King Alfred made important Christian writings accessible. By translating them into Anglo-Saxon, the common language of the day, and by promoting the reading of Anglo-Saxon, he put them in front of everyone who wanted to learn. He was only able to translate a small portion of the Bible, the first fifty Psalms. But his translation of Pope Gregory’s Pastoral Care gave the priests and bishops an opportunity to learn Christian leadership responsibilities in the absence of having the New Testament in their language. In addition, Augustine’s Soliloquies, which he also translated, provided an opportunity for the religious leaders as well as common people to reflect on important truths like the immortality of the soul. And all this was five hundred years before Wycliffe translated the Bible into English!

Legal scholars will be grateful to Alfred for producing the first written law code in Anglo-Saxon, called the [*Doom Book*](#), *Dōmbōc*, or Legal Code of Alfred the Great. In this code, he unified the old Saxon laws, starting with the ten commandments, parts of Exodus 18-21, and Matthew 5-8. The first point in the code said that people must keep their word and be faithful to their oath. This was because the public courts absolutely depend on the word of witnesses. We don’t have to look far today, unfortunately, to find people including world leaders who break their word, to the detriment of all! With regard to the rest of the Legal Code, Churchill wrote in his book *The Birth of Britain*, “The Laws of Alfred, continually amplified by his successors, grew into that body of customary law ... out of which ... the Common Law was founded” ([Wikipedia](#)).

One reason we know so much about King Alfred is because he hired his own personal biographer, Asser, Bishop of Sherborne. [*Asser’s Life of King Alfred was written in 893*](#). Only one copy survived to modern times, and it was partially destroyed in a fire in 1731. Fortunately, earlier transcriptions of it, as well as other materials of Asser, still existed, and scholars were able to reconstruct the biography. It’s likely that Asser also authored a good part of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which was copied and sent to many of the monasteries in Wessex at that time.

Some historians have cast doubt on Asser's *Life*. But "the consensus remains that it is genuine, if for no other reason than that a convincing motive for its having been a tenth or eleventh century forgery has not been established" (Foster, 2011).

Asser's history does have a positive bias to it, as everyone admits. But Alfred's military engagements, re-organization of fortifications, translation of Christian documents, and codification of Saxon law are acknowledged by everyone as significant. Historian Barbara Yorke, writes, "Alfred's reputation still stands high with historians, though few would now want to follow Edward Freeman in claiming him as 'the most perfect character in history'" (Yorke, 1999).

Alfred only lived fifty years (849-899). It's sad to think of what else he might have accomplished had he lived another decade or two. In his short life, however, "he raised up a generation of principled leaders to govern the Anglo-Saxons" (Merkle, 2009). As a result, his son Edward the Elder, and grandson, Ethelstan, who followed him as Anglo-Saxon kings, succeeded in unifying the entire island after his death. They also built on his work to further strengthen Christianity in England.



Figure 2 No drawing or sculpture of King Alfred exists. Artist and historian George S. Stuart created [this image](#) from his description in records.

Merkle concludes, "[Alfred] was a fierce warrior, a devout Christian ever thirsting for wisdom, deeply committed to justice, a lover of mercy, and a king who gave himself for his people."

References and credits

Figure of Alfred: George S. Stuart created this image from his description in historical records, and Peter d'Aprix photographed it. "The George S Stuart Gallery of Historical Figures® archive (<http://www.galleryhistoricalfigures.com>) is provided for all uses with appropriate attribution."

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