

The Legacy of Alfred the Great

2014 Midlands Regional Arts and Sciences Faire,

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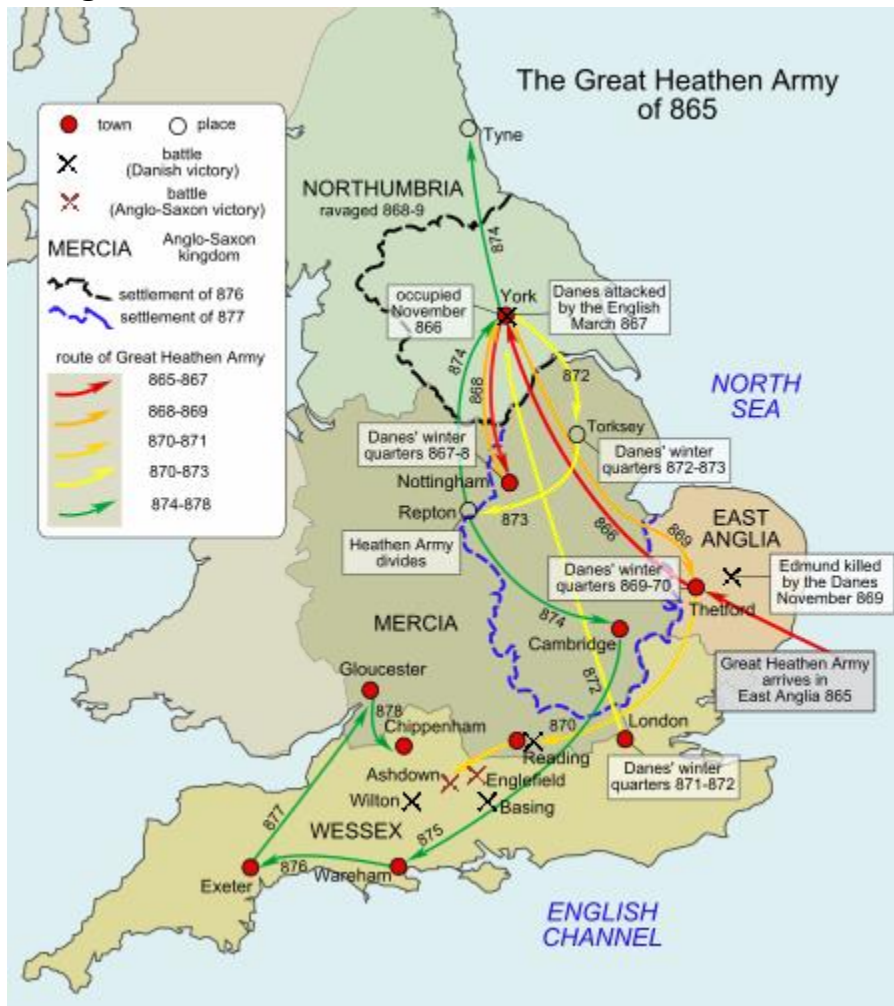
Summary

More than simply restoring England through military might, Alfred the Great transformed England with a series of reforms. Those reforms were military, educational, legal, and financial. This formed the basis of what would become England and the seeds of those reforms helped to form the modern English nation.

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Background



Imagine you are the last Anglo-Saxon king in Southern England. Northumbria, East Anglia, Mercia, and most of your kingdom (Wessex) has been captured by the Vikings and either ruled directly by them or through puppet kings. Your father and three brothers were king before you and fought these invaders. Most of your relations died to these invaders. You are now huddled with the remnants of your army in a marsh in Somerset. All that remains is a crude fort, and some hovels of some commoners. You go out for a walk and take refuge in one of those hovels. The occupants do not know who you are but show you hospitality. They simply ask that you do not let the cakes (bread) burn while they gather wood and hunt.

In this day and age, God is real and present. There is no “bad luck.” The Vikings are divine punishment for some sin the English have committed. God made you king. And while it seems hopeless, it is your duty to fight them or die trying. But how? They are numerous and fast. And what did your people do to merit God’s wrath? Lost in thought, the cakes do burn and the peasant woman rightly takes you to task. All you were asked to do is watch and turn the cakes so they do not burn. This is the scene that Alfred

faces in the late 870's AD. The last English king taken to task in a marsh for letting cakes burn. From this very humbling position, Alfred fights back and remakes England.

As Alfred observed in the preface to his English translation of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, kings who fail to obey their divine duty to promote learning can expect earthly punishments to befall their people.

How do we know what we know? Alfred is one of the few figures in history that talks to us directly. In the prefaces to works that he translated or had translated, he tells us what he thought and what he was working towards. Also, Alfred had two works made that carry his story to us. Alfred commissioned the Anglo Saxon Chronicle which continued on for about 250 years afterward (to about 1154 AD). The Chronicle is a list of important events that happen year to year. The other work is the Life of Alfred. Alfred convinced Asser, a Welsh bishop and scholar, to join his court and write his biography amongst other scholarly tasks [1].

Alfred was the 4th son and youngest child of Aethelwulf, King of Wessex. Each of his brothers was King before Alfred was. Alfred became King at the age of 23 to 25 (the date of Alfred's birth is a bit uncertain). This should give you some insight into what was happening; there was a lot of turn over with no brother ruling very long (2 to 5 years). Alfred was about 20 years younger than his oldest brother. We also know that Alfred suffered from some unknown and at the time incurable condition. Asser relates that Alfred suffered "all kinds of illnesses unknown to the physicians of this island." He states "from his twentieth year until his forty-fifth (his age at the time of Asser's writing) he has been plagued continually with the savage attacks of some unknown disease, such that he does not have even a single hour of peace in which he does not either suffer from the disease itself or else, gloomily dreading it, is not driven almost to despair." It is very unusual for Asser to tell us this. A-S kings were supposed to be strong in mind and body. Many other biographers go out of their way to idealize and glorify their subjects. So, it is unusual that Asser tells us that Alfred was ill in some sense. However, this snippet comes from another Alfred story. When Alfred was about 12, his mother had a book of English poetry. She promised her children that whomever could memorize it first could have the book. Alfred grabbed the book and had tutors read it to him over and over until he had memorized it. The point of the story was it illustrate Alfred's love of learning which will be important later [2, whole paragraph].

Military Reforms

Much of Alfred's legacy is military. To defend his land, he developed Burhs, fortified towns roughly 19 miles from each other. This formed a defense in depth strategy. First, the Vikings were usually interested in smash and grab type encounters. So, when they came around a fortified area, they generally avoided it. The relative close proximity of the burhs allowed for multiple garrisons to respond to any areas the Viking chose to besiege or to Viking movements in the areas. Likewise, Alfred had fortified bridges constructed over rivers. Again, since the Vikings tended to sail or row up rivers, these bridges provided a platform to attack and harass incoming Vikings [3].

The defense in depth strategy is not new and the fortified bridges were definitely borrowed from the Carolingians. The innovation was in how these burhs were manned and maintained [3].



Prior to this system, the main way raiders were dealt with was by calling up the fyrd. The fyrd was a local militia in the Anglo-Saxon shire, in which all freemen had to serve, those who refused military service were subject to fines or loss of their land. It was the responsibility of the shire fyrd to deal with local raids. The king could call up the national militia to defend the kingdom, however in the case of hit and run raids, particularly by Vikings, problems with communication and raising supplies meant that the national militia could not be mustered quickly enough so was rarely summoned [3].

Alfred changed the way the fyrds worked to create a standing army. But Alfred could not afford to maintain this army on his own so he instituted a three-fold obligation on tenants. These common burdens were military service, fortress work, and bridge repair. First off, each burh was assigned a certain number of hides (enough land to support a family). Each hide was expected to provide one man for the fyrd. At any given time, half of the fyrd was on garrison or repair duty. The other half of the fyrd was at home, working [4].

The formula for determining the number of hides per burh is thus: 1 hide is one man, each pole (16.5 feet) of wall needs 4 men. For example Winchester is 9954 ft. of wall which is 600 poles (roughly) and therefore 2400 hides. According to an appendix to the Burghal Hidage, Wessex had 27000 hides and therefore 27000 men for garrison duty. That is roughly 1/10 of the adult population.

More than the obligations though was the fact the burh was a community. It was a market center for the surrounding area. As such, it generated taxes and wealth. People were attracted to the area and so wanted to live nearby for protection and ease of trade. This provided the manpower needed to garrison the burh. The people who dwelt near the burhs eventually became known as burghers. It was the start of the medieval town life in England and the middle class [4].

Alfred is sometimes considered the father of the British Navy as well. He had captured some Viking long ships on shore. He then had several long ships constructed to fight the Vikings on the seas. He was the

only English ruler up to this time to actually have a victory at sea over the Vikings. His ships were large troop carriers, intended to board and then kill any Vikings on ships. Because they were so much larger than the Viking longboats, they didn't always win because sometimes the tide would ground the English ships and not the Viking ones-- but they did serve as a strong deterrent once the navy was established [4].

Educational/Language reforms

Alfred's main legacy is language. In Alfred's time, there was a great dearth of learned men. Alfred wrote himself of the problem: "very often it has come to my mind what men of learning there were formerly throughout England . . . and how there were happy times then" and "Learning had declined so thoroughly in England that there were very few men on this side of the Humber who could understand their divine services in English, or even translate a single letter from Latin into English [5]." Furthermore, there is a diploma from Canterbury circa 873. Canterbury is where the first Archdiocese of England was founded and the home of its most important monastery. The diploma is virtually unreadable in Latin. The phrases are a collection from old charters and witness lists that have very little to do with the diploma. The scribe could not have possibly had any idea what he was writing to have used Latin so poorly.

Prior to the Great Heathen Army showing up, the learned spoke and wrote Latin and these were primarily churchmen. Bede's history is in Latin. Charters and edicts were issued in Latin. Since the Vikings tended to attack monasteries, the number of churchmen declined to the point that it was extremely difficult to find those who could read and write Latin. There was some written English but it was mostly in poem form. It was Alfred who mirrored what Charlemagne had done and transformed education in England.

At the age of 40, he taught himself Latin and set about having several of what he considered important works translated into English. The books chosen were deliberate. Since the monks couldn't read Latin, they were not familiar with the rules of their own orders. They did not know how to go about their work or what their rules of conduct should be. The people did not know their own history. Medicine was dominated by Latin monks and doctors. Alfred saw what the reliance on Latin did; a small group of easily defeated men held all of the important knowledge. Once they had all been killed, there was ruin. So he established English as the common language [4].

Alfred translated several these important works himself, Pope Gregory the Great's Pastoral Care, Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy, St Augustine's Soliloquies, and the first 50 psalms of the Psalter. He then had other works translated by court scholars that he gathered from Wales, England, and France. These included Orosius's *Histories against the Pagans*, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bald's *Leechbook*, *Metres of Boethius*, *Dialogues of Gregory the Great*, the *Blostman* "Blooms". And he probably had *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* commissioned.

Alfred carried around a Handboc that contained fragments of works that Alfred found important or inspiring.

He set up a court school where his children, the children of his nobles, and “a good many of lesser birth” would be educated in the liberal arts in both English and Latin. The goal was two-fold; gain an educated populace and enable better system of communication. Alfred was aware of another problem; the larger the kingdom got, the more he needed to rely on other officials to carry out his commands. That meant more opportunity for corruption. However, with an educated bureaucracy in English, that lessened the corruption.

Through this program of learning, the Wessex dialect of English becomes preeminent. And the way prose English is constructed starts to take shape. Logically, if there was no prose English before Alfred, someone had to determine and decide the rules of grammar. Alfred had a large say in how English was to be constructed.

Alfred then populated the old abbeys and new with new recruits from all over the world and started them to copy these important works. Alfred was still a ring-giver and Anglo-Saxon king though. He sent gifts to ensure the work was done.

There is a famous find, the Alfred Jewel, is probably part of a gift that Alfred made to many of the abbeys, monasteries, and churches in England. The figure is supposed to be Christ holding sheaves of wheat, representing Christ in Wisdom. The Alfred Jewel has the inscription: "AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN", meaning 'Alfred ordered me made'.



It is supposed that this was a part of a pointing stick for reading and that several similar items were given to learned men with the translations of those books.

Legal reforms

Alfred compiled all of the laws of England into one book. This book as 120 chapters to be in line with the age of Moses at his death. The compiled law is not intended to weed out inconsistencies but to bring all of the law to one place so it could be applied equally. The Domboc lists out financial penalties for nearly all potential crimes except for treason to one's lord. The Domboc does include many older sources of law, the laws of Kent, Ine, and Offa with updates and clarification on current Wessex laws. Basically, the Domboc is more intended to be a treatise on kingship and the use of law. The Domboc, even with its contradictions, is the earliest basis for English Common Law [6].

Alfred also insisted that all of his judges be literate as well so that they could know and follow the law as he established it. Asser tells us of an occasion when Alfred had illiterate judges before him [6]:

“I am astonished at this arrogance of yours, since through God's authority and my own you have enjoyed the office and status of wise men, yet you have neglected the study and application of wisdom. For that reason, I command you to either relinquish immediately the offices of worldly power that you possess, or else apply yourself much more attentively to the pursuit of wisdom [6].”

He regularly reviewed cases to see that the law was applied uniformly. Asser again tells us that he had copies of rulings made when he was not present brought to him so he could review them. He wanted to make sure the law was applied consistently everywhere in his realm. This was especially true of the poor who Alfred felt that he was the advocate for. There is a story from his son's time (Edward the Elder) that Alfred would hear cases in any moment of free time he had, such as while washing as he was rising for the day [6].

Financial reforms

Alfred also set about reordering his finances to support his new systems and his obligations to God. Alfred divided his revenues in half. The first half was for secular affairs and this was further divided three parts. So, one sixth of his income was used to pay for his retainers and courtiers. Another sixth was to pay for craftsmen as commissions for all manner of works. And then another sixth was given to foreigner travelers who called on his court.

The other half was set aside for God's work. One fourth of this amount, or an eighth of the total, was alms for the poor of his kingdom. Another eighth of the total was for two monasteries that he had founded. Another eighth for his school. And the last eighth was for neighboring monasteries from Mercia, Cornwall, Northumberland, Wales, and even Brittany and Ireland [7].

Conclusions

Alfred's legacy is nothing less than the survival of England. It would not have taken much for Guthrum to make a final push. Norwegian would be the language we speak today if so. But Alfred laid the foundation for a strong defense and trade system that would make England wealthy. More importantly, he laid the groundwork for the development of the English language (as prose) and its literature. He then used that language to lay the basis for Common Law which still influences us today. Alfred was not called Great in his time. Indeed, it was almost the case that we would have known nothing about him. Fortunately, lovers of books saved the little we know until the Victorians, looking for a connection to a noble past, found this man and labeled him Magnus, the Great.

References

[1] We might not even know about Alfred at all or this period of history. The Viking raids of the 7th through 9th centuries destroyed many monasteries and killed many of the men who knew how to read and write. But education did recover. Then Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII threw the collections of these monasteries to the open markets. Most of these volumes were never heard from again. But at least one man loved the old books. Robert Cotton collected many of these volumes. And he had trials and tribulations with them. He was arrested by Charles I for his politics and his library ordered sealed. Under Cromwell, the library was restored to his family but his son and grandson only made small additions to the cataloguing and organization. They gave the whole collection to the British people but Parliament found it difficult and expensive to maintain. Then in October 1731, the real problem sprang to life. A fire had broken out in building housing this library. Many books were saved but many were also damaged. And important to this story, Asser's *Life of Alfred* was one of the lost books to the collection. Cotton was only one man who collected these old works but many of the other men sought to improve on what they had or added stories to them. It took years of research amongst these varying versions and finding fragments here and there to tell the tale of Alfred the Great.

[2] Asser, *Life of Alfred*, p 23, 25, 91

[3] Abels, Richard (1998). *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*. Longman. [ISBN 978-0-582-04047-2](https://doi.org/10.1017/9780582040472).

[4] Pollard *Alfred the Great*, p 211 to 213.

[5] Alfred the Great's preface to Gregory's Pastoral Care.

[6] Asser p. 106

[7] Asser p.100, 101, 102

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[ISBN 978-0-582-04047-2](#).

Alfred the Great's preface to Gregory's Pastoral Care.