

# The Anglo-Saxons

by Rob John

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## 2. Alfred the Great

- Narrator:** The year 871. Ethelred - king of the Anglo-Saxon land of Wessex – has died fighting the Viking invaders. So who should the next king be?
- FX:** *General hubbub of the meeting*
- Voice 1:** My lords! Ethelred is dead and we are still at war with the Viking invaders. We must choose a new king quickly!
- Voice 2:** I propose Ethelred's eldest son, Aethelwald! He's the obvious choice!
- Voice 3:** But Aethelwald is young, no more than a boy. We are at war. We need a grown man to lead us.
- Voice 1:** And who, my lord, would you suggest?
- Voice 3:** Alfred, Ethelred's brother!
- Voice 2:** Not Alfred, Alfred is weak! He's always ill. He won't survive.
- Voice 3:** It is true that Alfred is often ill, but he is not weak.
- Voice 2:** Some days he is so ill he cannot ride his horse.
- Voice 1:** Alfred has fought bravely in battle.
- Voice 2:** Alfred is not a true warrior. He would prefer to spend his time reading books than preparing for battle!
- Voice 3:** We must have kings who can read as well as lead us into battle! Our new king should be Alfred!
- Voice 1:** I too am for Alfred!



**FX:** *Other voices 'I am for Alfred' / 'Alfred for king!' etc*

**Narrator:** **Alfred was in his early 20s when he became king and although it was true that he was often ill, he certainly wasn't 'weak'. The greatest challenge the young king faced came from the Vikings, who had invaded in the north and were moving south...**

**Thane:** King Alfred, the Vikings are advancing again. We cannot beat them.

**Alfred:** And I say we can.

**Thane:** But sire - they are stronger than us, they have better weapons. We are outnumbered.

**Alfred:** Time; if only we had a bit more time to gather our strength. We just need a bit more time...

**Thane:** Sire - the Vikings march. There is no time.

**Alfred:** Then we must buy time.

**Narrator:** **And 'buy time' is exactly what Alfred did. He made a deal with the Vikings. They agreed not to attack Wessex in return for money. They called that money Danegeld. The Vikings left Wessex in peace but then in 878 the Viking leader - Guthrum - launched a surprise attack on Alfred.**

**FX:** *Sounds of battle, horses, cries of men, clash of metal on metal*

**Thane:** Sire, you must escape!

**Alfred:** No, I will fight and die here alongside my soldiers.

**Thane:** Then all will be lost. Escape now and you will live!

**Alfred:** I will not run.

**Thane:** Sire, please! We need you to live...to lead us to fight another day!



**Narrator:** Alfred escaped from the Vikings and with a small group of followers, hid in a village surrounded by marshes.

Years later a story was told of the time when Alfred was in hiding. It was said that for many weeks he stayed in the house of an old woman. Alfred was disguised as a poor man so that she had no idea the King was living in her house.

**Woman:** Hey! Make yourself useful! Keep an eye on the stove. I have bread baking. When the loaves are ready be sure to take them out. Understand?

**Alfred:** Yes of course - I promise to watch your bread.

**Narrator:** But Alfred was too busy thinking about the Vikings, too busy trying to work out how he might defeat them...

**Alfred:** We'll need more men to fight. We are still too weak.

**Thane:** And weapons - more swords!

**Narrator:** Alfred forgot about the loaves of bread and when the old woman returned...

**Woman:** They're burnt!

**Alfred:** I'm sorry. I wasn't...

**Woman:** I told you to watch my loaves and now they're burnt to a cinder!

**Thane:** Enough! Be silent. Do you know who you're speaking to?

**Woman:** Yes! The fool who burnt my loaves!

**Thane:** No. You are speaking to your...

**Alfred:** No. It doesn't matter who I am. She is right to call me a fool. I was given a job to do and I failed. *[To the woman]* I'm sorry. I will pay you for the burnt loaves. And next time I am given a job I will not fail.



**Narrator:** When Alfred was ready to leave the marshes he took off his disguise and dressed once more as king...and from all over Wessex people came to join him, ready to fight the Vikings.

**Alfred:** Now we have an army! This time we will take the Vikings by surprise and this time we will win!

**FX:** *Louder cheering. Music*

**Narrator:** Soon after - at the Battle of Edington - Alfred was as good as his word. The Anglo-Saxon army defeated the Vikings. Guthrum, the Viking leader, promised that he would never attack Wessex again... and in return Alfred gave the Vikings land to the east of Britain, which became known as the Danelaw.

**Alfred:** We have won a great victory, but we can never be safe until we have trained a proper army. Till we have a fleet of ships, till we have built towns which we can defend. We must look to the future!

**Narrator:** Alfred put his plans into action: soon that army was trained, those ships were built and new towns, with castles to defend them, sprang up all over Wessex.

Alfred may have been ill for much of his life but he is remembered as one of the strongest kings. He is still the only English king to be given the title 'Great'.